

# Game Narrative Review

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**Month/Year you submitted this review:** December 2016

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**Game Title:** SOMA

**Platform:** Windows, OS X, Linux, Playstation 4

**Release Date:** 22 September 2016

**Developer:** Frictional Games

**Publisher:** Frictional Games

**Game Writer/Narrative Designer:** Mikael Hedberg

**Creative Director:** Thomas Grip

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## Overview

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SOMA is a survival horror game taking place in a sci-fi universe developed by the indie game studio Frictional Games, the studio behind Penumbra and the excellent Amnesia. The game is set in a futuristic underwater research facility known as PATHOS-II, a few years after a meteorite has killed all human life on the surface of the planet. We play as Simon Jarrett, a car accident survivor as he awakens 100 years later from an experimental brain scan. Confused and disoriented, he finds himself trapped in a mysterious dark facility where terrible events seem to have happened recently. Simon then meets Catherine Chun a crew member present as an AI in the system, who will guide him to achieve her last mission; saving “Humanity”.

Following its predecessors, SOMA is a psychological horror game that privileges stealth, exploration and puzzle solving to action and combat. The story is told through dialogues between the two main protagonists and also through environmental clues and various items scattered around the game levels.

The game tackles the themes of trans humanism, human consciousness, artificial intelligence, identity and subjective experiences.

## Characters

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- **Simon Jarrett** - Simon is the player character and the main protagonist of SOMA. He is a young Canadian adult who recently survived a car accident that left him with a brain damage. After an experimental brain scan he took 100 years ago, he awakes in an underwater research facility. He finds out that a recent meteorite impact on earth wiped the whole planet’s population and all of PATHOS-II crew members are dead in mysterious dark events. Simon is then inadvertently forced to uncover the station’s mysteries. Throughout the game, we follow Simon in four different forms/versions. First as a human 100 years ago, then occupying two crew dead members’ bodies after his consciousness was transferred into their suits. And finally as a virtual AI living in the ARK simulation.
- **Catherine Chun** - Catherine is the deuterogamist of the story. She used to be PATHOS-II’s system engineer. Her final personal project was to build the ARK; a simulation where

the conscience of some crew members will continue to live forever. She died just before sending the ARK into space. After transferring her conscience into the facility's system, she acts as Simon's guide throughout the game, helping him finish her unfinished work.

- **Johan Ross** - Dr. Ross used to be an AI psychologist in site Alpha. He was one of the first that noticed that the WAU is malfunctioning and that it needed to be eliminated. Despite him being resurrected by the WAU, Johan Ross surprisingly acts against its will. He isn't hostile and tries at multiple occasions to warn Simon that he needs to destroy it.
- **The Warden Unit (WAU)** - The Warden Unit is a centralized AI system in PATHOS-II and acts as the main antagonist of SOMA. It was developed in the classified Alpha site and was charged of the control and maintenance of the facility. After the meteorite impact cataclysm on the earth's surface, the WAU triggered a state where it had to preserve the human existence on the station. So it started uploading the employees' brain scans into robots and injecting human bodies with structure gel causing them to mutate. Those mutations controlled by the WAU started attacking and killing the remaining crew members since they were considered as threats by the system.
- **The Proxies** - The proxies are the crew members who became bio-mechanical monsters roaming in the facility's corridors. They were mutated by the structure gel injected to them by the WAU. The proxies are the primary monsters that Simon encounters throughout PATHOS-II. They become extremely aggressive once they notice Simon's presence and it's very hard to escape them. Most of them seem to have lost their vision but have an increasing sense of hearing.
- **PATHOS-II Crew Members** - The research facility crew members are the last human survivors after the meteorite crash on earth. Throughout the game we retrace their last days as they struggle to survive the WAU's madness. Simon finds out about what happened to the station by reading fragments of their journals and emails and also by listening to their communications logs and black box recordings... The crew members are a key element to understand the details and subtleties of SOMA's overarching story.

## Breakdown

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SOMA starts in Simon Jarrett's apartment in Toronto Canada. This is the starting point of the game's story and this is where the player will get to know the protagonist backstory, personality and motivations. Soon we find out that Simon just had a car accident that left him with a serious brain damage. Then, we follow him to his appointment with a doctor who's going to make him take an experimental brain scan. As soon as he sits on the chair to make the scan, Simon experiences a blackout and wakes up in a dark desolated research facility.

This introductory phase is very important for the rest of the game since it teaches the player how the story of SOMA will be told. In fact, following its predecessor Amnesia, the game tells its story mostly through game elements and environmental clues. Apart from some shorts cut scenes that happen at some points during the game, all the narrative is being told through visual and auditive observation. During the apartment scene, the player gets to know the main character Simon through different tools. There is the first and most obvious tool which is the "**tableau**". The tableau is the overall feel you get from a general look at a location. The apartment immediately tells us that Simon is a middle aged single guy who is neither tidy nor messy and that he loves reading books. Next we start exploring the environment and investigating the scene, and here we learn about the second tool used for the story which is "**readables**". Readables are any kind of

document, picture, journal, log... that the player can read or get a deeper look at. These items are particularly important for giving us an insight on the backstory of some characters or even locations. Another tool used for storytelling in SOMA is “**recordings**”. In fact, the first recording we find is a message on the phone left by Simon’s doctor reminding him of his brain scan appointment. While recordings serve a similar purpose as the readables, they have the advantage of giving us a clue on the personality of certain characters and their relationship with other characters by listening to their tone. Also, recordings are a good way to get a sense of temporality so we know how the events have evolved in the past. One more narrative tool used in the game is “**monologues**”. During that introductory phase, Simon sometimes speaks to himself, most of the time in an ironic way, and this is a great way for the player to get the personality of the protagonist and also understand his motives. Finally, we find the classical “**dialogues**”. While the first one we have in the game with the doctor is not really important, the dialogue will be a major tool for the remaining of the game used to make the story progress, build characters’ relationships and set goals for Simon but most importantly for the immersiveness of the game.

Soon after the blackout, and after a moment of shock and disbelief, Simon meets Catherine Chun who will serve as his guide and only companion throughout the story. The player now has all the tools he needs to not only progress through the game but also understand it and discover its mysteries. SOMA being primarily a horror game, the oppressive atmosphere is reinforced by the feeling of solitude in a hostile environment where no other character seems to be present. The challenge was then to find a way to tell a complex story without using cut scenes since they break the immersive quality of a horror game and also without relying only on dialogues since most of the time the protagonist will be by himself. Throughout the game, the player will be moving from one location to another uncovering piece by piece the mystery behind his inexplicable presence at PATHOS-II facilities. This is where all the tools cited above came into play and become the main loop of progress through the game’s narrative: upon arriving to a new location, the player will always start by getting a general idea of that place’s purpose and what might have happened there, then by inspecting the different readables left by the past occupants he gets to know a little more about the people who were there and their motives. Then by going through the recordings he finds, the player will retrace the last days of the people who used to live there and can understand what led them to their demise. All of this while Simon occasionally comments on certain events or discoveries through monologues. These tools provide the player with a very effective way to explore the environment and progress through a story. A story that seems to be following two different timeframes: the recent past and the present.

After some primary investigations Simon makes at PATHOS-II, he finds out that he is in the future 100 years after he went for the brain scan appointment. He is in an underwater research facility used to extract energy from the center of the earth. This research facility started experiencing terrible events recently soon after a meteorite wiped the entire earth’s population. The centralized UI system called the WAU started injecting the crew members with structure gel and plugging them into the system. The crew members transformed into bio-mechanical monsters called proxies, controlled by the WAU and started attacking other members and killing them. While still trying to understand how he find himself in the future and in such a place, Simon meets Catherine Chu a woman who used to be a crew member and now lives as an AI in the system.

The moment Simon meets Catherine is the moment everything starts to go down in a spiral. She explains that Simon is in fact the conscious of the old Simon (who lived in 2015) transferred into a new body. The experimental brain scan he had was in fact the test of a new way to copy the human consciousness. While Simon is still trying to process this new reality, he also understands that the WAU triggered a protocol to preserve human life after the meteorite accident. This is what motivated the system to inject structure gel into humans and plug them into the system. In other words, transforming the crew members in some sort of aliens is a way found by the WAU to save human life from death. Catherine continues by explaining that after people started dying in PATHOS-II, she and her research team decided to build a simulation called the ARK to save what is left of humanity. This simulation will contain brain scans of the still alive crew members, where they will continue to live for eternity as artificial intelligence. They believed that this is the only and last way to save what was left of the humanity as we know it. She then asks Simon to finish her mission before she died, transferring the ARK into space so nothing can ever happen to it and the simulation can last for eternity.

Now that Simon has more insight on what happened to these facilities he decides to help Catherine send the ARK into space. From now on the story of SOMA is told in a parallel way following two timeframes. While exploring PATHOS-II and moving forward our final goal, Simon is building his own story, the story of saving humanity by sending the ARK into space. However in the same time, through exploration and by using the tools cited above, Simon gets to relieve the final days of the crew members. Going from site to site, he starts learning about the people who used to occupy those locations and the tragic events that led them to their demise. And this is where SOMA shines.

Following these two timeframes makes us not only discover the past occupants of the facility but also makes us discover ourselves through them. And when I say ourselves, I mean Simon as the main character but also us as the players. The game puts the player in situations where he has to live unthinkable events and where he has to make morally ambiguous choices.

The first moment of this kind is when Simon meets a mockingbird (a robot) that thinks he's a human because the WAU transferred someone else's mind into his system. Simon has to unplug him in order to be able to progress. Even though the robot begs you not to unplug him, you still have to do it and it's a very disturbing moment seeing a conscious entity screaming in agony. Another moment of the game and certainly one of the strongest SOMA moments, is when you have to do another brain scan and transfer your mind to a new host, creating a third version of you. After you finish the transfer, you find out that your old you is still there conscious but sleeping. Simon freaks out and is upset because he thought it would be a direct transfer and not a copy. The game gives the choice of choosing if you want to let him live there forever by himself or unplug him and delete his memory? Sometimes it's not about choices but more about deep reflexions on how people would react and think if confronted to these kind of situations. For example, by going through recordings and readables left by the crew members we learn about some members who decided to commit suicide just after doing their brain scan and copying their mind into the ARK. The person you are and your copy in the simulation are exactly the same person just after you finish the scan. So they believed that the only way to ensure continuity is to commit suicide right after the scan. The climax of the story is when Simon was finally able to transfer his and Catherine's consciousness into the ARK and send it to space. Despite being in his third form or

copy, Simon being in complete denial still didn't get that it's a copy process and not a transfer of mind. He sits there watching the ARK launching into space, still not believing that a copy of himself will live inside the simulation forever while he is stuck inside this artificial body. The game ends while Simon is screaming in rage and anger, without even Catherine being there to comfort him. Never saving humanity felt so sad and maddening.

This is the kind of horror that SOMA make us go through, not the fear of monsters or the fear of death, but more the horror of madness and self-doubt. Moments where everything you believed in and took for granted can be questioned by the most random of events. In fact during this horrific journey, Simon is confronted to different existential and philosophical questions that makes us question our own existence and humanity. What makes humans, Human? Is a robot with a human consciousness still a robot? After copying your mind to a new host what should happen to your old self? What makes one copy of you more worthy of living than another copy? Should you allow an AI to be responsible for human lives? What does life and death mean to a conscious AI? These are some of the questions that you will be asking to yourself at some points of the game.

SOMA brilliantly managed to tell two stories in the same time, PATHOS-II crew's story and Simon's story. Using tools that blur the line between game design and storytelling, Frictional Games was able to raise the bar once again and make us live one of the most memorable, immersive and self-questioning stories ever made for an interactive media.

## **Strongest Element**

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SOMA will be remembered as the game that made players questions their own humanity. No doubt that this was the strongest element of the game. What appears to be a sci-fi horror game at first glance turns out to be a complex psychological trip into human consciousness and self-awareness. While other games and media in general look at artificial intelligence from a human point of view, SOMA gives it an inside look through the eyes of a self-aware conscious AI. This generates more questions than answers and it's not rare that you will find yourself questioning the reality of your own existence while playing the game.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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As mentioned above, throughout the game Simon is sometimes talking to himself in monologues of various lengths, and these moments are usually tainted by an irony that we pick up in his personality since the beginning of the game. While this gives Simon an enjoyable and light character, it also makes him not believable at some moments. The way he starts making jokes and accepting the fact that he is awake as a robot 100 years in the future, merely hours after he discovered is the only weak point of the game's narrative. By trying to make the monologues a moment of respite for the player after he went through a stressful horror phase, Frictional Games made the settings less believable at some moments.

## **Highlight**

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Certainly the moment where Simon finally reaches the launching pad, transfers his consciousness to the simulation, presses the button and watches the ARK go into space while he was still sitting there is the highlight of SOMA and certainly one of the strongest moments in video game history.

Even though Simon was already copied two times during the game, he was in complete denial and was hoping that he would wake up inside the simulation after launching the ARK. Listening to him scream in anger and rage discovering he won't take part of that final journey into eternity, at least not this version of him. Making you realize that you can envy another version of you is just terrifying, especially since you are in fact a version of an old you.

## Critical Reception

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SOMA was a critical success averaging 84/100[1] on metacritic and 98%[2] positive reviews on Steam. Most of the reviews praised the story and narrative of the game describing it as “engaging and thought provoking”[3] while also praising the “impressive” writing and voice acting. Players almost unanimously agreed that the game lived to Amnesia’s excellency and even surpassed it. SOMA was nominated for three categories at the 2016 Golden Joystick Award, Best Original Game, Best Story Telling and Best Visual Design. Despite its critical success, the game didn’t get the expected commercial success. SOMA took almost a year of sales to start making profit but turned out to be more profitable than Amnesia[4].

## Lessons

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- Game Design can be used as a tool for narrative design. The “tableau”, “recordings”, “readables”, “dialogues” and “monologues” system used in SOMA was a great way to convey a story in an environment that lacks living characters. Letting the player explore and search his surroundings to understand the story creates an engaging and immersive experience.
- It is possible to tackle overused themes and create a refreshing experience if you find a way to look at the issue from a different experience. Making us play as a self-aware conscious AI is one example of this being a success.
- A horror game can rely on story and psychology instead of jump scares and surprise elements to create an oppressing atmosphere that keeps the player engaged at all moments.
- If you make the players introspect and examine their own thoughts, feelings and beliefs while playing the game, it will create a memorable and touching experience.

## Summation

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Living to the expectations that can generate a game like Amnesia is a huge challenge. SOMA managed to live to those expectations and surpass them. Perfectly using game mechanics and design decisions to convey a story about self-awareness, consciousness and the meaning of being human, SOMA managed to be one of the most memorable games of these last years. The game proves that the psychological horror genre is still flourishing and that sometimes all it takes is to look at a subject from a different perspective to touch and surprise players in ways never done before.

## References

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- [1] <http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/soma>
- [2] <http://www.polygon.com/2016/9/23/13035886/soma-sales-profits-postmortem>
- [3] <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/soma-review/1900-6416245/>
- [4] <https://frictionalgames.blogspot.se/2016/09/soma-one-year-later.html>