

'The Room' Turns Players Into Characters in a Lovecraft Story

By Phil Hornshaw
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Sometimes video games aren't meant to empower or immerse, but for something much more primal: to scare the crap out of you. *Playboy's Fear and Loading* series peers down dark hallways and checks under gaming's bed to find the games that terrify us, and delves into how and why they work.

One of the best games available on smartphones is about solving intricate puzzles—and it also happens to weave a haunting tale of obsession, murder, and cosmic terror.

You'd be excused for not always realizing it, however: Much of what composes *The Room*, a brainy little title found on *iPhone* and *Android* devices, are gorgeous graphics and fascinating, multi-stage puzzle boxes. It's a series that sports one puzzle in which players disassemble a model ship, and another that's a *Game of Thrones*-style mechanized model city that rises out of a table. Solving a portion of the puzzle presents players with a jaunty chime signaling success.

It's a presentation that, in many ways, belies a Lovecraftian horror tale. Each level in these games centers almost exclusively on its ornate and expertly conceived puzzles, in which players must carefully search for hidden switches, keys, compartments and codes. There's so much focus on finding solutions, and how each step in a puzzle leads to the next, that it's easy to miss the bigger picture. *The Room* games aren't always overt about their subject matter, but they're games about life and death, forces beyond knowing, and madness in the face of oblivion.

There's more to *The Room* than some of the best puzzle-solving in gaming, understated though it may be, and the series is building toward ever-more frightening territory.

THE FIFTH ELEMENT



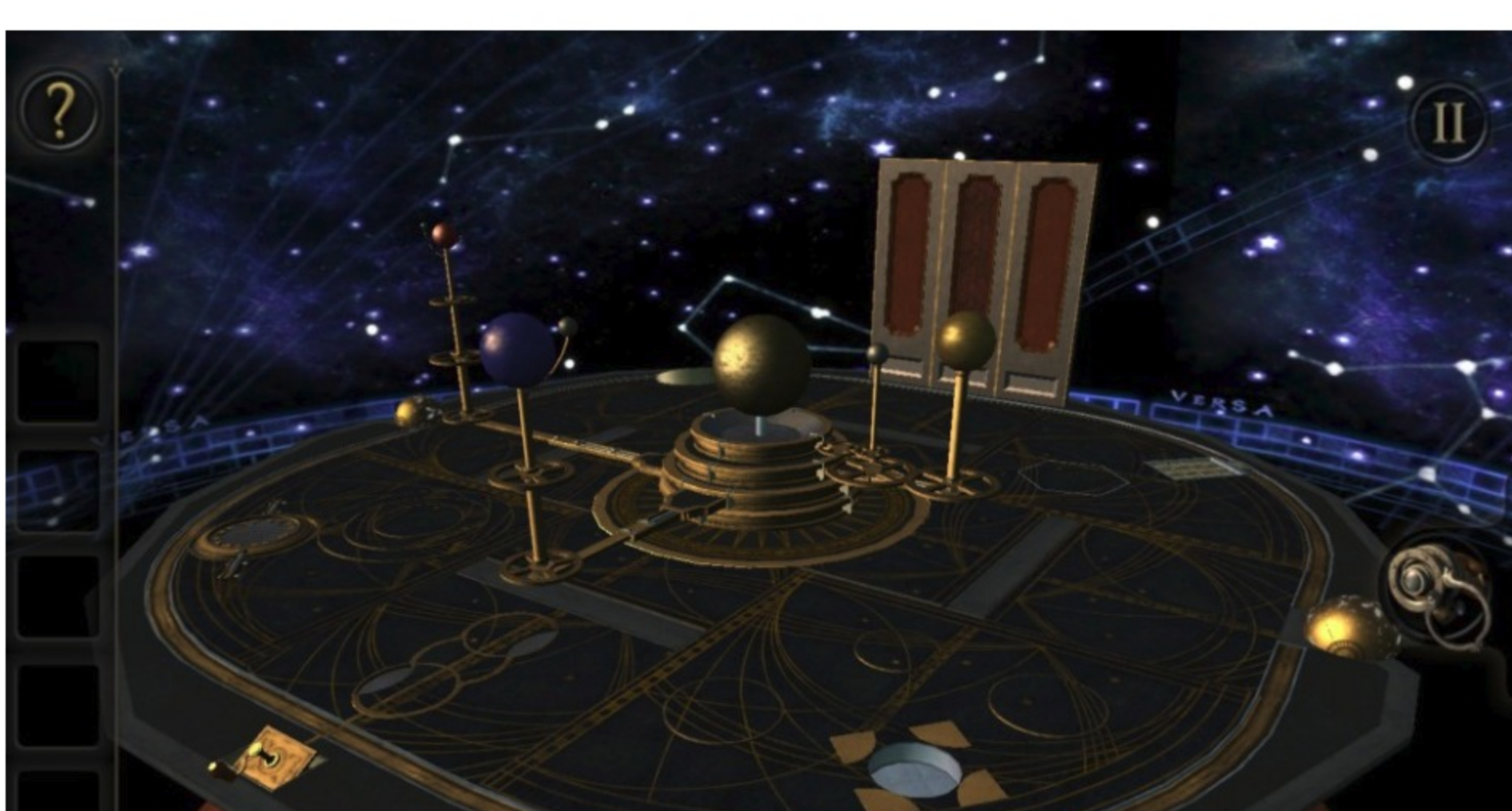
At the start of *The Room*, the player takes on the role of a nameless character in the home of a friend. In that home stands a safe with no lock, a note waiting atop it. It only takes a few moments to discover the box is more than it appears, and when a strange lens is discovered within, it becomes possible to see things that aren't otherwise visible.

The friend communicates only through a series of notes, each signed "AS" with a flourish. Each details AS's work in alchemy, the research into which has yielded a discovery, a fifth element, beyond air, water, fire and earth. Delving into ancient civilizations revealed more and more information about the mysterious fifth element, which AS dubbed "Null." Somehow, the strange, fantastically powerful substance is linked to these incredibly detailed boxes: unlocking one reveals another, and another, and another.

Before long, the search for the Null became an obsession for AS. Colleagues abandoned them; the alchemy community to which AS belongs ostracized them. But pushing forward, eventually, AS made a breakthrough—the missing piece of the puzzle was a living being, and after a strange reaction, AS produced the Null element. It wasn't without a cost, though: AS said the Null felt "as if it was tied to my very soul."

It's at around this point that *The Room* starts to change, both for the player and for AS. The lens, it turns out, is made from the Null. AS writes that they used it extensively, until they started developing headaches and seeing hallucinations. At one point, AS abandons trips to the wine cellar because the visions and headaches become worse the further underground they go.

DESCENT INTO MADNESS



As *The Room* continues, AS's notes detail hallucinations and headaches as they get closer to unlocking the secrets of the Null. You realize, somewhat belatedly, that you're following in AS's footsteps: you're opening their puzzles, you're seeing the creations of the Null, and you're using the apparatus that so affected AS's mind.

While nothing about the actual game changes—you continue to search the puzzle boxes for the next hidden switch or out-of-place mark—little things start to shift. The house creaks around you as if someone stalks the halls, just out of sight. You hear whispers, just over your shoulder, in a language you can't quite make out, a number of voices you can't quite identify. But all the time you're transfixed on the box, unable to turn away or stop.

Plenty of horror stories get slapped with the moniker "Lovecraftian" as a means of explaining what they're like. When it comes to *The Room*, it seems like a Lovecraft influence is obvious—and yet it's understated, with developer Fireproof Studios using elements from the famed 20th century writer's work to carefully evoke a feeling rather than a style.

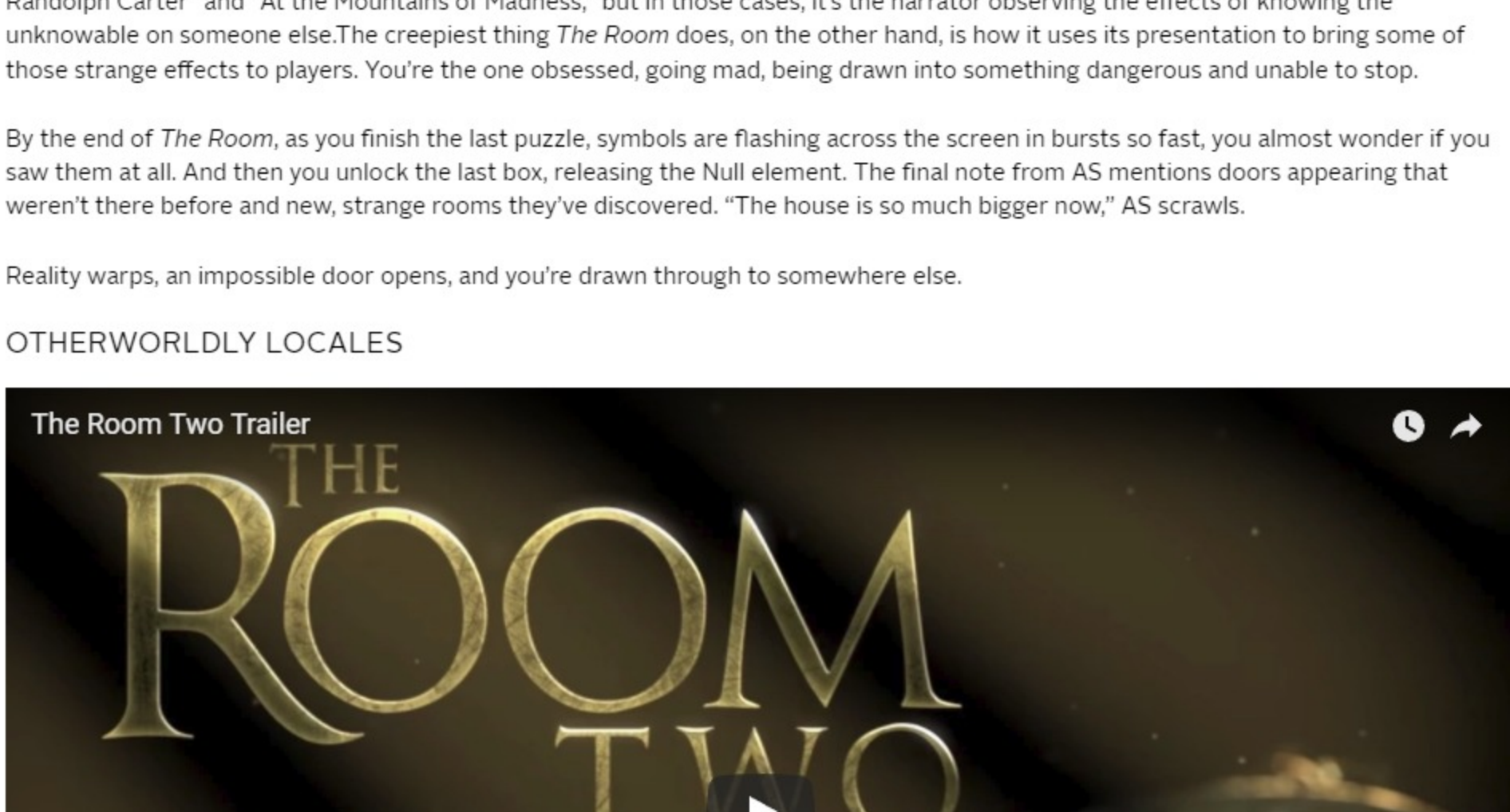
Clearer of *The Room*'s influences is probably H.P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu." Both start with the narrator—in the case of *The Room*, the player—discovering the notes of a researcher. Those notes slowly unfold a story of something ancient and otherworldly slipping into the minds of humans, driving them to madness.

Lovecraft describes that madness in characters who are touched by ancient, cosmic beings in "The Call of Cthulhu," "The Statement of Randolph Carter" and "At the Mountains of Madness," but in those cases, it's the narrator observing the effects of knowing the unknowable on someone else. The creepiest thing *The Room* does, on the other hand, is how it uses its presentation to bring some of those strange effects to players. You're the one obsessed, going mad, being drawn into something dangerous and unable to stop.

By the end of *The Room*, as you finish the last puzzle, symbols are flashing across the screen in bursts so fast, you almost wonder if you saw them at all. And then you unlock the last box, releasing the Null element. The final note from AS mentions doors appearing that weren't there before and new, strange rooms they've discovered. "The house is so much bigger now," AS scrawls.

Reality warps, an impossible door opens, and you're drawn through to somewhere else.

OTHERWORLDLY LOCALES



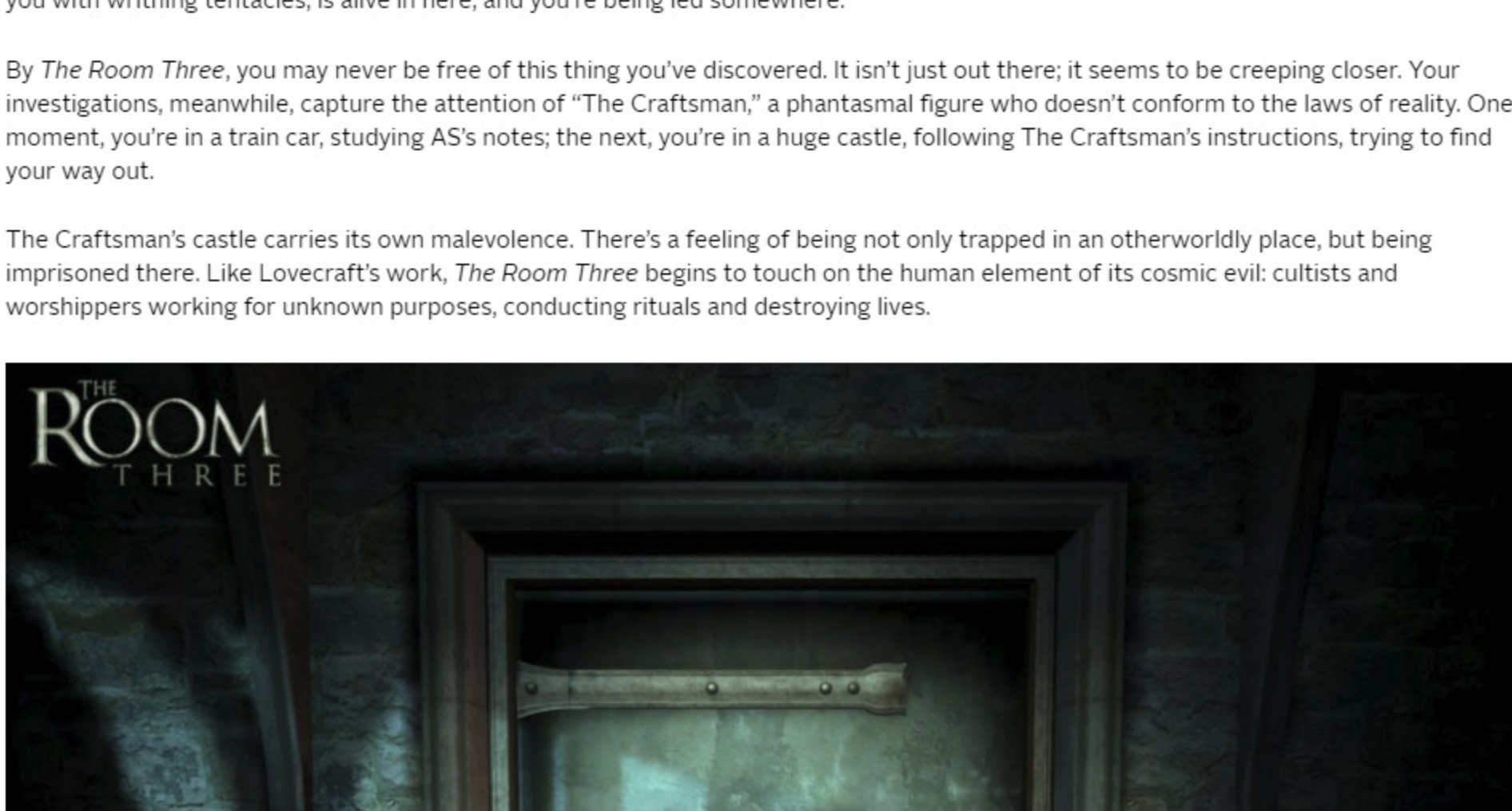
The Room Two and *The Room Three* begin to expand and warp what Fireproof Studios started in its original game. Where the first game ends on a cliffhanger, with the player sucked into some warped reality, the second game expands on these locations, with the player navigating a labyrinth of puzzle-filled places.

All are ethereal. One is below decks on a wooden ship, another, the early 20th century office of a clairvoyant; still another, the interior of what could be an ancient, underground tomb.

Obsession has given way to desperation, as well, as following in AS's footsteps has trapped the player in this ethereal realm. And before long, it becomes clear that AS didn't make it, and that some kind of intelligence is at work in this place—something unknown, reaching for you with writhing tentacles, is alive in here, and you're being led somewhere.

By *The Room Three*, you may never be free of this thing you've discovered. It isn't just out there; it seems to be creeping closer. Your investigations, meanwhile, capture the attention of "The Craftsman," a phantasmal figure who doesn't conform to the laws of reality. One moment, you're in a train car, studying AS's notes; the next, you're in a huge castle, following The Craftsman's instructions, trying to find your way out.

The Craftsman's castle carries its own malevolence. There's a feeling of being not only trapped in an otherworldly place, but being imprisoned there. Like Lovecraft's work, *The Room Three* begins to touch on the human element of its cosmic evil: cultists and worshippers working for unknown purposes, conducting rituals and destroying lives.



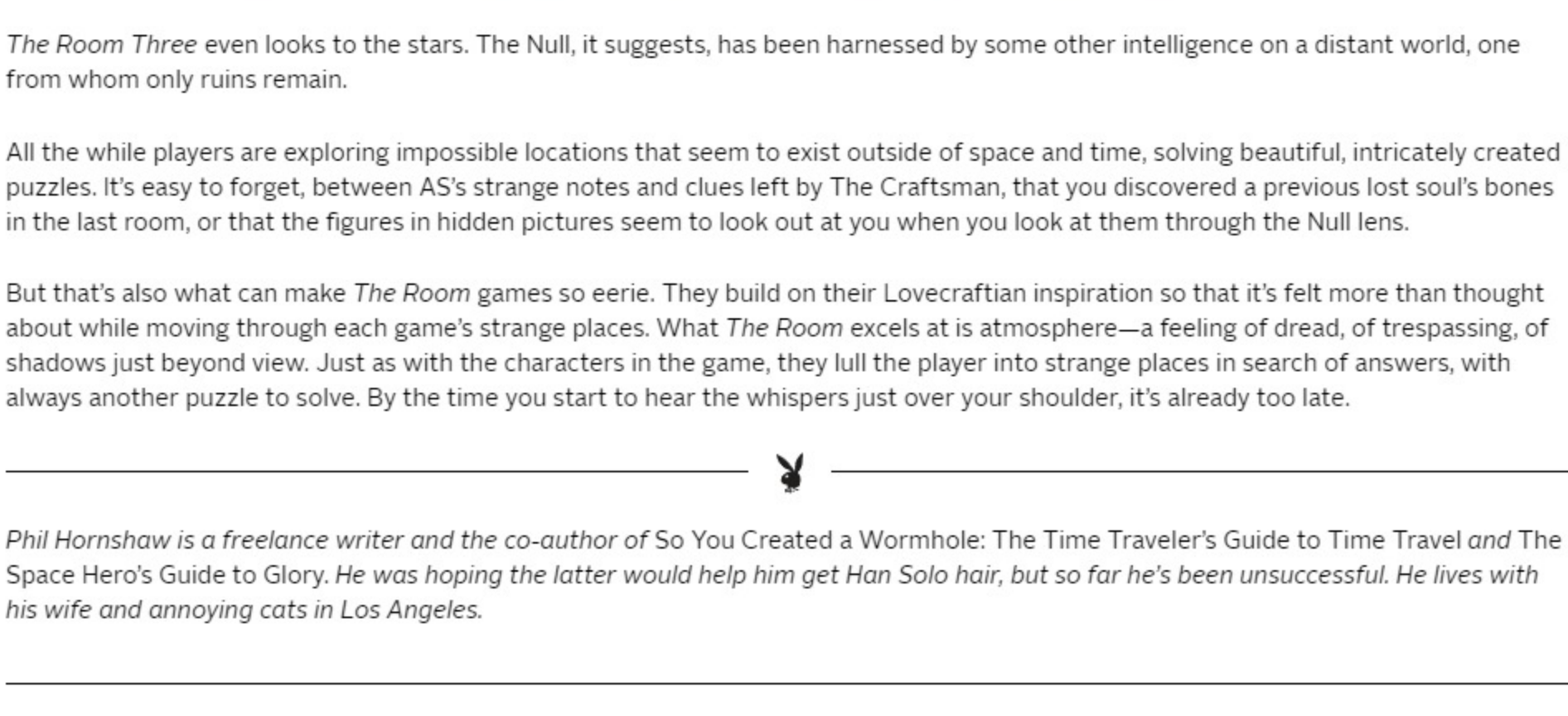
The Room Three even looks to the stars. The Null, it suggests, has been harnessed by some other intelligence on a distant world, one from whom only ruins remain.

All the while players are exploring impossible locations that seem to exist outside of space and time, solving beautiful, intricately created puzzles. It's easy to forget, between AS's strange notes and clues left by The Craftsman, that you discovered a previous lost soul's bones in the last room, or that the figures in hidden pictures seem to look out at you when you look at them through the Null lens.

But that's also what can make *The Room* games so eerie. They build on their Lovecraftian inspiration so that it's felt more than thought about while moving through each game's strange places. What *The Room* excels at is atmosphere—a feeling of dread, of trespassing, of shadows just beyond view. Just as with the characters in the game, they lure the player into strange places in search of answers, with always another puzzle to solve. By the time you start to hear the whispers just over your shoulder, it's already too late.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel and The Space Hero's Guide to Glory. He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

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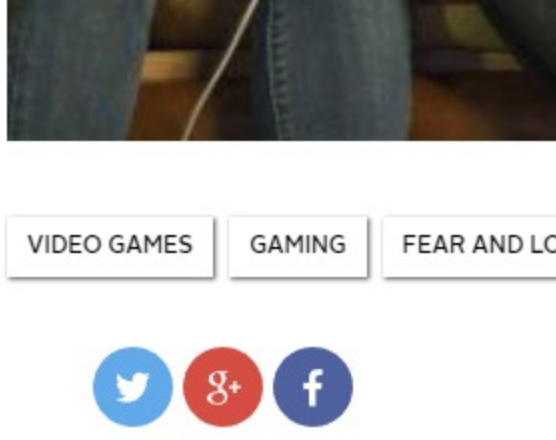
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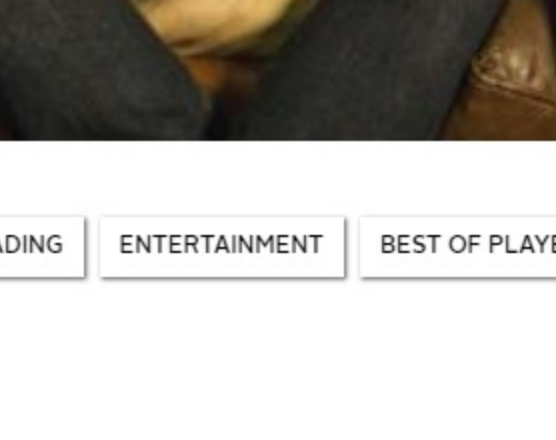
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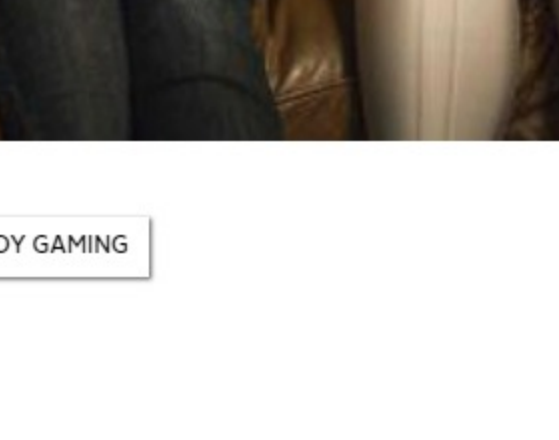
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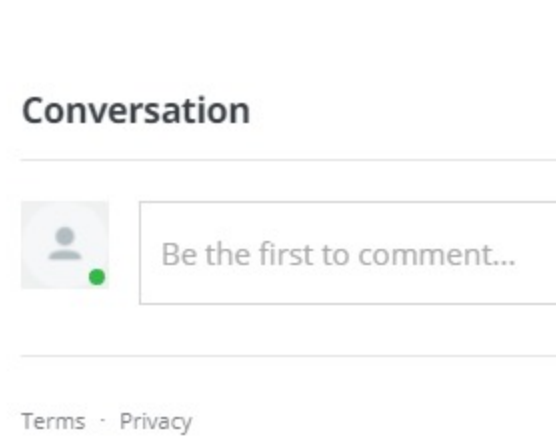
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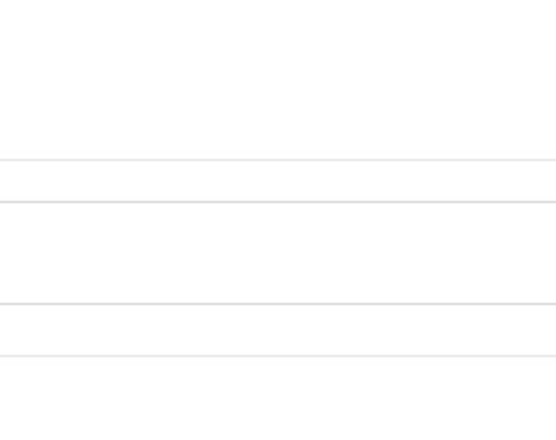
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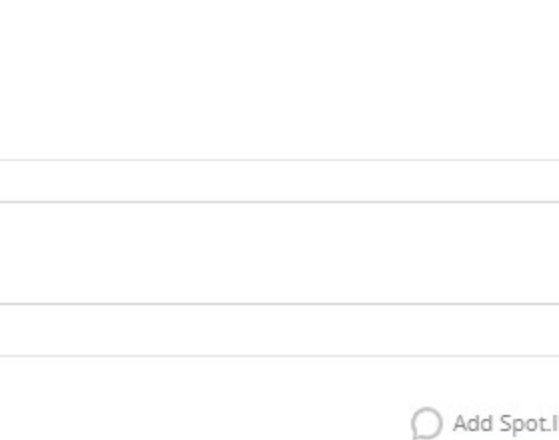
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