

A Computer's Love is More Terrifying Than Its Hatred in 'SOMA'

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.



Artificial intelligences seem to go homicidal a lot, especially in the sci-fi future, and especially in video games.

Fear of technology, especially as it outpaces human understanding or as it causes humanity to move away from things most people view as "traditional" and "pure," is a longstanding idea in horror, and it routinely gets exercised in games. Big, omnipotent computers make good villains. They turn spaceships and research bases against the people who live and work in them. They corrupt the bright future of progress and make it something deadly.

In the recently released sci-fi horror game *SOMA*, as in many horror titles, an AI plays a central role as antagonist. Known as the Warden Unit, or WAU (pronounced "wow"), the AI eventually starts covering the entire underwater facility where the game takes place in black goo—"structure gel," the game calls it. The stuff has special properties, like the ability to infect and repair electronics and machinery, or to infect and repair, to some degree, organic material. Simplified: the WAU is seeping through the whole place with tendrils that can turn living things into uncontrollable abominations.

But the WAU isn't out to kill the humans it was meant to protect. It's actually trying to save them. It's just that the WAU's definition of "save" is a little bit off.

PRESERVING HUMAN LIFE



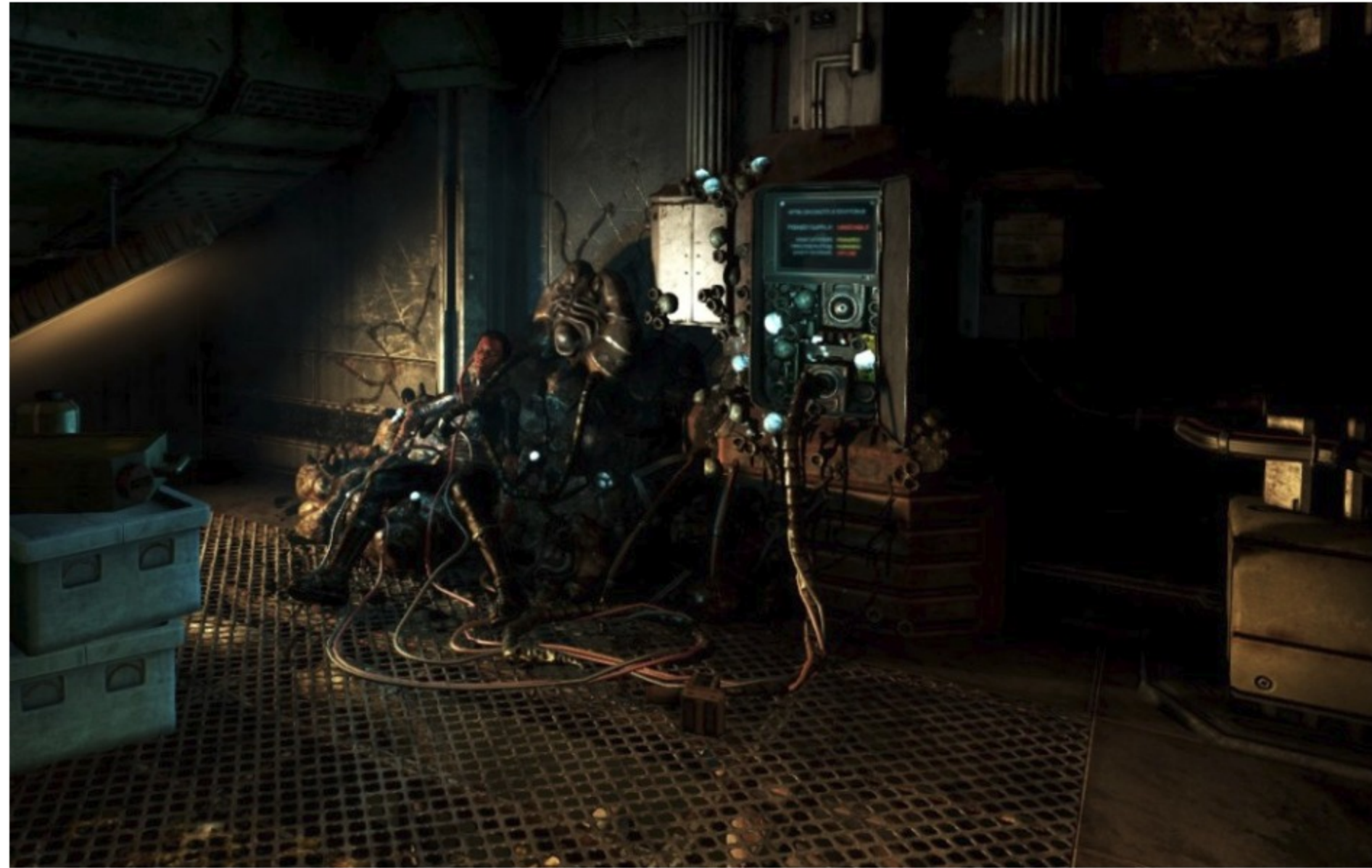
There's no end of (often horrific) sci-fi stories supposing what life will be like after computers become too smart for humans to keep up with. Author Isaac Asimov famously created the Three Laws of Robotics in his stories, logically deducing that in order for humanity and robots to coexist, the robots would have to be programmed to value human life. Over the years, various stories have toyed with that idea, mostly going in the direction of the programming failing and the robots becoming lethal.

Robots who hate humans can be plenty terrifying, and lots of games have dipped into that well before. Perhaps the most frightening tale of an AI that hates its creators is *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, Harlan Ellison's short story that later became a point-and-click computer game. AM, the computer system in the story, has engineered the extinction of humanity, save four poor souls it keeps alive to torture, endlessly.

Even worse, AM seems to have near-omnipotent powers, including the ability to alter the physical form of its victims and to make them functionally immortal. In the story, AM uses that power against the narrator after he manages to finally help kill the other characters, releasing them from their torment. AM then transforms the protagonist into a smooth, gelatinous, mouthless blob, so that he'll never have a chance to end his own life again. (Something akin to that ending is available in the game, too.)

SOMA is on a similar tack, for a different reason. The WAU is, like AM, altering its human victims by means of its superior intellect. But unlike AM, its motivation isn't deep, essential hatred: the WAU is following its programming to save human life. It's just doing so in an alien, unknowable, terrible way.

AN ALIEN INTELLIGENCE



All around PATHOS-2, the station on which *SOMA* takes place, players discover the workers and researchers who populated it. The WAU's mandate is to preserve their lives at all costs. To do that, it's gradually transforming them with its black goo, sometimes integrating machine parts into their bodies, sometimes rendering them into barely conscious blobs. It's all for their own good. As one character cries as she's being overtaken by the WAU's changes: "Nothing is allowed to die."

The WAU, like AM, reacts to humanity in a way that's unpredictable and uncontrollable. Once *SOMA* starts to make clear, by way of material like notes and audio logs discovered throughout the game, that the computer is acting in what it sees as its victims' best interests, it becomes all the more frightening.

The logic of the machine is cold, but not entirely insane. The humans in its charge are in danger, and it has the ability to upgrade their resilience, or to scan their brains and download their consciousnesses into tougher robotic bodies. The part we recoil from is the WAU's misunderstanding of humanity: it doesn't get what makes us us.

Many games paint villainous AIs as broken-down machines, acting either in faulty ways or in ways that seem more like human personality traits playing themselves out in computer form. Games like *SOMA* and *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* approach the AI as something that would be so different from the human mind, with an experience so foreign to our own, that it would be something impossible to comprehend. AM and the WAU operate on planes humans can't understand: they don't think like we do. That makes them dangerous, and frightening.

FATES WORSE THAN DEATH



There are points in *SOMA* where, in order to advance, you must remove power cables from robots and plug them into terminals. Sometimes, these robots aren't robots at all—they speak and act like people, and even seem to think they are. They often beg you not to hurt them.

You can advance through these portions of the game by killing the creatures when you remove the power cables, but if you act carefully, you can still move on while leaving them hurting, but alive. Though they ask for your help, it becomes apparent later in the game that you'll never be able to send any. Thinking back on the people left behind, one can't help but wonder if they'd have been better off dead. But under the WAU's benevolent watch, they're doomed to live.

That's where *SOMA* creeps into your head: not with the monsters that hunt you, but with the characters that haunt you. Left in the throes of the WAU's liberal conception of "human," but alive, death seems like a mercy. Like the characters under AM's torment, it's hard not to wonder if it'd be better to die than to become some other thing. It's a skin-crawling proposition.

The horror of *SOMA* isn't about losing your life, but losing everything else. It makes you wonder how much you could lose and still be you—and what it would feel like to have everything, even the choice to end, taken from you.



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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