The Body and Beyond: The Posthuman Horrors of *Soma*

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Abstract

The 2015 survival-horror game '*Soma*' uses a dystopian setting to a far different use than most works of visual storytelling from the said genre–beyond the spectacle itself–to invoke a deep contemplation over the intervention of science into human existence, and the potential threat this 'post-human' future poses, not to the physical human existence, but to the idea of humanity itself. This paper analyzes the narrative elements of the game to understand the world it portrays, to see how close it is to a plausible reality, and what it means as a part of experiencing an interactive story.

Keywords: Video Game, Interactive Storytelling, Posthumanism, Body Horror, Consciousness, Identity.

Introduction

Developed and published by Frictional Games in late 2015, *Soma* is a single-player video game that fuses the genres of science fiction and survival horror in a post-apocalyptic dystopian setting while accomplishing a rare feat for a video game in recent memory–delivering a complex philosophical argument instead of taking the safer commercial route of a visual media franchise. In a decisive and clear fashion, *Soma* contains only one narrative ending that arguably qualifies it as an exemplary work of existential horror, one that raises pertinent questions on the meaning and essence of human existence itself and what it means in a time when the swift advancement of science continually challenges our fundamental understanding of consciousness and life as separate concepts from the bodily human existence.

The story of *Soma* follows the protagonist Simon Jarrett, a book-store employee from a normal life in the year 2015 who finds himself trapped in a nearly inhuman, reanimated body of a deceased individual in an abandoned underwater research facility called PATHOS- II in the year 2104 after a copy of his consciousness created from a brain-scan in 2015 is activated in a body in 2104, shortly after all of mankind has been wiped out by a comet-collision. PATHOS-II is inhabited by an artificial intelligence called the Warden Unit (WAU)

that singularly focuses on the task it was made for—keeping any human being alive, regardless of their condition or will, a few former residents whose consciousness had been copied or transplanted onto a robotic body, and Catherine, a scientist whose consciousness had been copied onto one of the computer systems in the facility.

Over the course of under a day, the present Simon—with assistance from Catherine—struggles to survive the infernal landscape and find a means of escape, namely, the ARK, a simulation created by Catherine that could emulate a healthy and happy human world for thousands of years to come. In due course, his consciousness is replicated on two different occasions, continuing as a whole self in both bodies, retaining all of his past memories and emotions—just as the original Simon continued his normal life after 2015. Thus, the game questions the ideas of consciousness and the identity of the 'self,' especially with respect to its physical manifestation and socio-cultural context.

This paper delves into a descriptive analysis of select instances from the narrative content of the video game to understand the potential future of the physical human existence it ideates and comments upon through the many concepts that it depicts as essential parts of its world-building, some of which have been subjects of frequent scientific and philosophical debates. In the process, attempt has been made to explore the posthumanism depicted in *Soma* as a plausible future and the many consequences of its several distinct aspects.

The "Human" in a Posthuman World

It is noteworthy that the game focuses on the idea of human survival but does not feature in its lead a single character who is entirely human—at least on a physical level. In this particular observation, the term 'human' must be understood as the biological being associated with the term in the present time, which is visibly distinct from the physical and biological status of Simon in *Soma*, since his body is only partly based on a human corpse and reanimated through technological assistance. It could be understood that this description of 'human' is at least in part supported by Francesca Ferrando in *The Body* as, "The word 'human' derives from Latin 'humanus,' an adjective cognate to 'humus' meaning 'earth, ground, soil,' on notion of 'earthly beings' whose symbolic realm would mark the border with the one of the celestial gods" (Ferrando 214). Here, the association of the human body to the earth signifies a biological origin in the earthly realm. This in no way implies that in order to stay true to the etymology,

a human body may not be artificially assembled even if its components (metal, etc. if imagined as a robotic being) originate in the earth. Therefore, since the component material of the structure gel used by the WAU to assemble such bodies is not clarified to be of earthly origin or otherwise, Simon's frequent denial of being 'human' indicates that his mind associates the term 'human' to only a naturally born human body.

Initially, upon his first meeting with Catherine, finding that she too was in a computer system, Simon complains, "No, not you too. I was really hoping you were human" (43). In a later instance, after having to kill a robot to get a tool-chip from it, Simon is overwhelmed with guilt and contrasts his own new physical being to that of the robot. He says, "I just can't stop thinking about what we've become. It's clear that we're no longer human" (48). This might indicate a period of transition–even transcendence–from the 'human' to the 'post-human,' seen particularly as an advancement. This again is supplemented by Ferrando as she mentions the case of hybridity in zoomorphic mythical characters from around the world being seen as beings of a higher order. In addition, she says:

> In cybernetics, an avatar indicates one (of many) graphic representation of a user, while its etymology suggests a transcendental nexus: in Sanskrit 'avatar' refers to the appearance or manifestation of a deity from heaven to earth, and it is widely translated into English as 'incarnation' (Ferrando 220).

This makes an appealing case for considering Simon a post-human entity, having surpassed the limitations of the biological human body. The distinction of the body from the 'human' is made at several other occasions as well. In an early instance, Simon comes across the corpse of Carl Semken, a researcher at PATHOS-II, and shortly after, a sentient robot claiming to be Carl Semken, although displaying no knowledge of the fact that he is currently not in his human form. In a parallel, Simon takes a while before fully understanding the fact that he is no longer in his living human body either. This suggests the mind's perception of human existence doesn't depend on the physical human form at all.

Hereafter, Simon continues to compare his previous perception and understanding of human existence to the great abnormalities he continually witnesses in this new world. This dilemma–for both Simon and the audience–is accentuated by a recorded interview of PATHOS-II scientist Mark Sarang that Simon comes upon, in which Sarang ponders over the ARK and says, "it really

makes you think about what it means to be human."

Simon, having endured the numerous encounters with people beyond recognition or hope of a healthy life being kept alive by the WAU against their will, comes to terms with it after killing the WAU midway through the story. Upon being asked for the reason for doing so by Catherine, he simply states: "to stop it from torturing the memory of humanity"—a statement that, although with considerable sentimental weight, helps raise the question if Simon, and by implication all of human beings, describe 'human' as per their memory and experience of the term, or if the word itself has an inherent, unchanging meaning. This transformation of Simon from a 'human' to a 'post-human' yet remains open to dialogue until historical boundaries are drawn to describe the emergence of the 'human' and therefore the particular nature of such a being, and subsequently the point where it ceases to exist. Stefan Herbrechter states the following in *Before Humanity,* "As we do not know how and when we became human, we also do not (and thus cannot) know how and when we will cease to be human" (26). Yet, with sufficient regard to the transitory nature of our understanding of these terms, it remains valid and even somewhat necessary to contemplate them through such works.

The Body and the Being

The contemplation over the human existence in *Soma* proceeds with a constant dialogue over the bodily state and experience of any individual. The slow and gradual acquaintance that Simon makes with his new body is akin to an infant learning to operate its own limbs, displaying how the mind may function separately from the body. In several different scenarios, we find that Catherine, whose consciousness is entirely within a computer system, doesn't feel a break in the continuity of time, which establishes that the perception of time as well as all existence through it is not related to the physical manifestation of a consciousness. She describes this experience as an omission of time–in contrast to falling asleep– due to the lack of anticipation or any closure. Catherine seems to be far more accustomed to such an existence, setting a contrast to highlight Simon's discomfort. In one instance, Simon asks Catherine if she feels at all "bothered by not having a body," to which Catherine answers:

> I'm getting there. You're making me feel really self-conscious. I never felt that comfortable being human in the first place. This isn't much worse. My physical constraints don't translate to my experience very

well. I feel about as human as before, but as if suspended in air. Which is kind of interesting, now that I think about it. (*Soma*):

The response, among other things, highlights the following major observations:

I.   The human experience of relating to one's own body comes through a conscious thought process and subsequent realization, reminiscent of the concept of self-alienation in the much-disputed Mirror-stage in Lacanian Psychoanalysis.

II.   The idea of comfort or the lack thereof with regard to the physical body one possesses may only arise upon the mind acknowledging the possession of the said physical body and its existence as an extension of the self. Although once acknowledged, the experience of a natural body or foreign is indistinguishable to the mind.

    The latter is also, in addition to previously mentioned cases, established in a situation where Simon—or the second version of him after the first having continued to live after 2015—wonders about his sensory experience. He says

It's clear that we're no longer human. But then how can I feel like Simon? How can I feel anything at all? I mean technically I don't have any ears, no mouth–Christ, that's a weird thing to think about. I mean I'm making sounds. I'm still saying things.

To this, Catherine offers the following explanation: "Ok, your new body most likely has senses similar to those you had as a human. And your mind, only knowing one way to perceive the world, superimposes that skill set on top of your new features." Simon's rejection of the title of a 'human' purely on the basis of lacking the physical embodiment associated with the term is confounded by Stephen Lilley's observation in *Transhumanism and Society* as:

Prosthetic limbs, artificial hips and knees, cochlear implants, and pace makers are standard medical devices. Artificial bone, tendon, muscle, skin, blood, etc., are commercially available or are being developed. Each component may be seen as just one exception to an otherwise natural form, however taken together one is left with the impression that the organic body is replaceable. (Lilley 27)

After further discussion, Simon concludes that his mind has found "a good

balance between awareness and ignorance." This concludes the game's argument over the issue of the body by explaining that the mind works in synchronization with the body through conscious acceptance of the one-ness with the body coupled with the ignorance of the possible distinction. At this point, it becomes clear why the game would be named after the Greek term meaning 'body'—especially how it is perceived separately from the mind.

It is noteworthy that the transfer of consciousness in *Soma* is a complete transposition–as opposed to a kind of 'telepresence' depicted in most of Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) which ultimately takes a route of mystical fantasy instead of science fiction to complete the process by the end of the story. Yet, despite the distinction, the film makes the same argument as *Soma*: the distinguishability of the body and the mind, which is highlighted again by Stephen Lilley. Discussing what he calls radical transformation, he ventures so far as to reject the singular ownership of the natural body over the execution of the mind's will through a description of the 2008 neuroscience experiment at Duke University wherein a monkey named Idoya was tricked into operating a pair of legs of a robot called CB through her own neural signals, causing her mind to associate the foreign body to itself. Lilley therefore states that:

> Idoya's accomplishment is taken as proof of concept that the mind (or brain), suitably connected, can direct devices. The demonstration also succeeds by persuading the audience to consider Idoya's body (walking on the treadmill) and CB's body (also walking on a treadmill) as interchangeable objects under her mind's control. (27)

This conclusion, much like the phenomena like amputees experiencing ghost limbs, determines that Simon's ability to operate a foreign body as his own while being unaware of the change is more plausible than it may seem on the surface, and therefore, the experience of a human mind separate from its bodily limits—for better or worse—is a fairly human possibility, paving way for a posthuman reality where the consciousness could be understood on an increasingly objective level.

The 'Real' Self and Replicated Consciousness

Given that the plot is mainly centered around a technology that is capable of replicating human mind—with its consciousness, identity, memory, etc.—so that it exists independently in distinct physical bodies, it quite naturally leads to the question of which of these must be thought of as the real self. It is noteworthy

in this case that the version of Simon that is the playable character and a perspective for the audience is still a second copy of the real person, which emphasizes the indistinguishability of a replicated consciousness from a natural one.

Moreover, in the following exchange that transpires between Simon and Catherine in PATHOS-II while Simon still continues to struggle with his new-found knowledge, he says "I wonder what the real Simon would have thought if he knew about me." "What do you mean? You do know about yourself," Catherine responds. No, I mean the real Simon. The human Simon," Simon clarifies.

This dialogue makes it clear that not only is the protagonist self-aware enough to know that he is separate from the original Simon, he is also aware of the fact that he is not biologically human, even if he still feels and thinks as one and continues to have his individual personality. It can be claimed that it is this understanding of his own distinct existence that allows him to view the other versions of himself as real, by implication, considering himself real as well, albeit not on a biological or cultural level.

With respect to this, Simon goes on to ponder over the very nature of his existence, saying: "Is that what we are–simulation?" To this, Catherine responds with: "Yeah, but it shouldn't make a difference. You're still you."

This exchange can be considered a crucial one in showing the philosophy of the game that builds towards its conclusion–the plausible existence in a computer simulation that replicates the real world– and begs the question if such a replication itself could be any more or less real that what we consider real. The narrative therefore raises a deep existential question over the simulation theory first brought into popular culture by *The Matrix* (1999), and provides something of a closure, even if it is in the idea of reality being what one believes it to be–an exceedingly contemporary take on subjectivity in existentialism.

Towards the later parts of the narrative, when Simon has killed the WAU and is on his way to launch the ARK into space as per Catherine's plan, he wonders about the passage of time over the course of the one day the story takes place in, and says: "You know, I woke up in my bed today. It just happens to have happened a hundred years ago." To this, Catherine adds, "Sounds like a riddle." Simon then rephrases, saying: "It does. I woke up in my bed today–a hundred years ago. Who am I?" Significantly, Simon pauses and repeats in a

brooding, contemplative tone: "Who am I?" The question of identity seemingly frequents Simon's mind despite his memory of a past life since he now finds himself "uprooted," disassociated from the body and the world he identified with.

This echoes the question raised by Jan Gresil S. Kahambing in *Without Sex: An Appraisal of •i•ek's Posthumanism* wherein he talks about the possibilities of "consciousness-transfer, self-replication, and engagement of one's consciousness to the virtual world or cyber space" as:

> Given the frame of a genome outside an existing human one, this externality being the phrase 'brain in a vat,' exposes one's consciousness—here closely resembling the simulacrum of subjectivity and the intentionality that it poses—as an object. Meaning to say, if I can see myself in the brain in a vat, or my genome in a Petri dish, the radical question is: who is the real 'I'? (Kahambing 6)

This question appears exceedingly important considering Simon's three-fold dilemma over his identity and the subsequent doubt over whether the "real Simon" must be regarded on the basis of the primary human embodiment regardless of the ability to think and feel like a human—in barely a jarred, not ruptured continuity with Simon's lifetime before the replication of the consciousness—even in a foreign body. And although the association of the identity of 'Simon' with a nearly inhuman body falls well in line with the present-day technologies of prosthetics and transplant in the medical sciences, it does threaten the uniqueness of an individual self.

The culmination of the identification of Simon separate from the physical manifestation comes towards the conclusion of the story. After Catherine runs a scan to upload Simon's consciousness on the ARK, he realizes that he is still in PATHOS-II, trapped in a reanimated corpse. Catherine clarifies that they are simultaneously on the ARK as well as PATHOS-II, to which Simon complains, "They're not us! They're not us!" This declaration comes with a disregard to the fact that the Simon saying this is neither the original one who might have died in the 21st Century, nor even the first one to have been revived in PATHOS-II, thus indicating that even the "real" individual is debatable, and implying that "reality" itself is impossible to objectively explain, since it is only a product of the perception of a consciousness, which itself remains unexplained still.

The Meaning of Life and the Need for Survival

The depiction of a futuristic AI in *Soma* seems far too grounded for a high-concept science fiction narrative, with the WAU appearing as a system performing a designated task with an almost absent moral code or emotional framework. While it reduces one character that may be considered a kind of posthuman sentient life-form, it opens up avenues for others: the human beings barely kept breathing while they have little to no self-awareness, and the robots and corpses in bodysuits made sentient through a replicated human mind.

In an early instance, a woman past the hope of recovery and the will for living being kept alive by the WAU says, "It won't let me die. Nothing is allowed to die." The situation displays how the primitive understanding of the idea of "life" as conceived by an AI in binary terms essentially subverts the way human beings perceive their own existence and the idea of life itself. Catherine describes the WAU saying, "The AI isn't a persona; it doesn't feel or think like we do." Hence, it's believable that it's perception of life may be different from that of a human.

This is again brought up when Simon goes through old video recordings to discover how the structure gel of the WAU was first tested on mice. The reanimation of the dead mice is described as, "It came back to life – or something like it." This brings emphasis to the idea that mere biological reanimation of a living body doesn't essentially make it "alive," and the true idea of life perhaps lies in self-awareness and a will to survive—something natural to any living being.

Besides Simon, even Catherine, who possesses no human or even human-like body at all, shows this will for survival. In one of the early sequences, Simon loads Catherine onto an "Omnitool,"— a device that works as a digital all-access pass for every door and device in the facility. When unplugged hereafter, Catherine loses time until she is plugged in again. But it's interesting to note that on one of these occasions, she sounds exceedingly concerned as she urges Simon to "be sure to plug [her] in again at some point"—showing that despite the lack of any suffering or physical damage in the process, Catherine, who is still essentially a human, wishes to exist in one way or another.

What this comparison boils down to is that the true essence of life and sentience lies outside of the physical body, identifiable perhaps by its self-awareness and acknowledgement of its own existence combined with the natural

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will to sustain that existence. It also implies that it's plausible to say that in the future, with enough scientific advancement, the human form may after all be entirely dispensable and replaceable by something more advanced. Human existence could very well be entirely disembodied, thus fully transitioning into what we currently view as 'posthuman.'

'Soul,' 'Heaven,' and Religion in a Posthuman World

Regardless of the validity of its source and its history, historically speaking, any religion in practice and propagation is very much a human phenomenon. And this raises the question of what a religious or spiritual concept—in belief or practice—would look like in a posthuman world where life and civilization are no longer the way we presently perceive them. *Soma* addresses this in a subtle yet impactful manner—especially in its argument about the soul. In the first sequence of the game, when Simon gets his brain scanned in 2015, his doctor proposes its likeness to getting a picture clicked, to which Simon jokes, Indians thought cameras would steal their souls."

This metaphor of a photograph goes further throughout the game's narrative. Upon discovering how he had ended up in a new body in the year 2104, Simon says, "I was here all along, waiting for someone to shove a picture of my brain into a suit and hit the power button." This moment seems to remove the mystical element in these events at once for both Simon as a character and the viewer operating him. Towards the end, when Simon agrees to upload his consciousness to the ARK through a similar brain scan, he recalls the same statement, albeit with a minor but significant addition. He says, "Just like having your picture taken. But with the most expensive camera in the world. You know, Indians thought photos would steal their souls. In this case, they'd be right (*Soma*). This is a significant statement since it is the first to directly compare the human consciousness to 'soul', in which case, the possibility of the identical replication of that consciousness challenges the concept of soul as propagated by nearly every major existing belief system. Not only does equating the soul with a "picture of [the] brain" make it seem like less of a spiritual concept and more of a material object, but also threatens the very individual nature of the spiritual self and subsequently the other beliefs associated with it – afterlife and heaven to name a few. This, too, is further developed upon in another dialogue where Simon addresses Catherine as:

> Have we figured out what happens when we die yet? Is that even possible? If there's some kind of afterlife, do you think my place is

> taken? The real me died like a hundred years ago. Is there still room for me? And what about the Simon I killed at Omicron? What do you think, Catherine, is there a heaven full of redundant copies of the same people? Is there someone up there who'd call me an impostor? It's dumb luck, right? That I woke up in the right body? I basically flipped a coin and if I had called the wrong side I'd be rotting away at Omicron. I mean, there's no way to know, right? You didn't hit the "make sure Simon wakes in the right body" switch, did you? Not that you'd know, I mean he would still claim to be the right Simon. Christ! This is awful. (*Soma*)

The conclusion of Simon's narrative—a decisive one at that—establishes one thing if any: that any success at scientifically explaining, quantifying, or replicating human consciousness in essence renders nearly every spiritual or religious perspective of soul obsolete and primitive. This detail adds weight to the post-human philosophy of the game—exceeding the physical and extending into even the spiritual aspect of it. In addition, it adds another layer of credibility to the idea of free-will and human agency in techno-centric evolution. Martin G. Weiss' observation in Nature ironically attempts to bring this stage of the 'human' closer to nature by stating the following,

> The idea of human co-creation, well known in Christianity […], is especially important in Judaism. Here human being is seen as being as natural as everything else and therefore a fundamental part of creation. And if human being is part of created nature, his products are as well. (Weiss 198)

Although seemingly contradictory to the aforementioned observation by Ferrando on the Sanskrit word 'avatar' implying a transcendence beyond the human, Weiss' observation could be read as an attempt in the direction of encompassing the former and leading to the ideation of a 'human' which is not a predecessor to but merely a factor in the 'post-human.' This is further supported by Ferrando's explanation of the etymology of the term 'human' indicating its inseparable root in nature, despite the most extreme transformations.

This, when considered in the light of the shared religious observations of most Abrahamic religions as well as Hinduism, indicates that the uniqueness of the 'human' existence and experience lies not in its physical manifestation but the spiritual acknowledgement of its own nature and a pursuit of its identification

as a part of the universe, the understanding of which still continues to expand and transform–much like the possibilities of what it means to be 'human.'

Conclusion

With its confounding complexity of both the idea and the execution, *Soma* functions as a story with more layers than may be expected of a work of the medium, genre, or scale. The work tackles multiple facets of its central speculative theme, consistently challenging common perceptions of every aspect of human existence, and invoking primal dread through nothing but a look into ideas and concepts of science that are even still being studied and discussed, with steady efforts and ambitions directed towards their development and execution.

Through the dialogue over the ideas of transfer and replication of consciousness which are very much an intended reality for the future, *Soma* contemplates the possibility of a time when technology intertwines with human existence to such an indistinguishable degree that it challenges our understanding of our individual and collective selves, our species, and our civilization, and threatens our existence as we perceive it, especially on—but not limited to—the physical level.

While this does present a bleak image of a plausible future, it also provokes thought upon the subsequent possibility of the consequences of creating a technology that mankind is yet prepared to neither fully understand nor control—since we remain unfamiliar with the very essence or nature of the 'consciousness' that we are trying to manipulate and replicate—and entrusting in its hands the existence of that which we now refer to as 'human,' in its present form or in that which it eventually transforms into. With the emergence of technology supporting was has largely been speculation of a post-human future, it seems more urgent now than ever to establish a limit to what can truly be regarded as a 'human' body, and at what point the 'post' in posthumanism tends to transgress an acceptable, grounded idea of human existence.

It is incumbent to regard the various perspectives on a disembodied or radically transformed post-human existence offered by works of science fiction –many of them vastly different from that of *Soma*–and thus view the imminent biological and intelligent evolutions of the human species separately, and to question whether the product of the former may be seen as a landmark or an icon to govern the morality behind the latter. The future remains open to a

plethora of possibilities and rests upon the wise and responsible judgement of the collective human civilization.

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