

# Horror Design Case Studies

Analyzing iconic horror games  
through a system design

*SOMA 2015 from Frictional Games*

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# SOMA 2015 from Frictional Games Breakdown

## PLAYER CONTROL WINDOW

SOMA, much like Amnesia, removes combat to maximize the designer's control over pacing, fear delivery, and player vulnerability. The player's abilities are intentionally limited, pushing them toward observation, stealth, and environmental problem-solving. Frictional doesn't rely on jumpscares, but on the tension created by restricting how much the player can do at any given moment.



## Forced Camera Moments

While SOMA uses far fewer explicit camera locks than Layers of Fear or scripted horror games, it still guides where the player looks through:

- sudden audio events that pull attention behind or beside the player
- flickering lights drawing the eye to a specific corridor
- environmental movement (robots twitching, sparks, falling debris), forcing the player to react
- scripted sequences, such as monster reveals, that trigger only when the player crosses a threshold

## Examples:

- The WAU-infested robots twitch or call out to you, forcing you to look at them.
- The “Construct” enemy in Upsilon only activates when you step into a room in a specific direction.
- In Theta, the appearance of the Proxy is timed so the player naturally turns toward the source of the scream.



Even though the camera is never physically locked, **attention is controlled**, which is Frictional's way of guiding the horror without taking away player agency.

### Movement Control

Player movement is slow, deliberate, and vulnerable. The walk speed is intentionally restrained so that:

- The player cannot rush past encounters
- Stealth becomes meaningful
- The player must sit with tension instead of outrunning it



Areas with monsters (Construct, Proxy, Flesher) are designed with:

- Tight office corridors
- Dead ends
- Low visibility
- Waterlogged spaces that limit mobility
- Noise-sensitive flooring

These spaces shrink mobility and create predictable tension spikes “just by walking.” The slower pace also reinforces SOMA’s core theme: **you are not in control of your own fate.**

## Interaction Control

SOMA has a surprisingly dense interaction system: doors, terminals, audio logs, levers, broken machines, WAU structures, and scanners. However, Frictional uses interactions to **deliver pacing** rather than complexity.

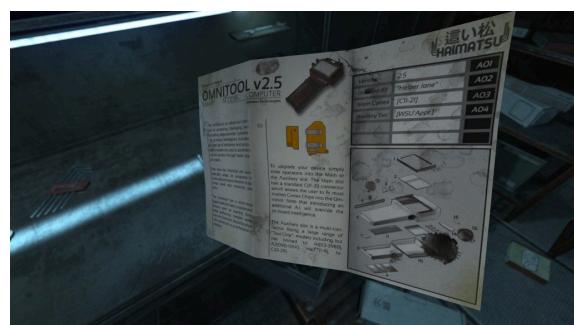


Interactions often lead directly into narrative or tension moments:

- Picking up audio logs → triggers ambient whispers or monster roaming changes
- Opening heavy submarine doors → long animation forces vulnerability
- Pulling a lever → activates power, causing disturbances in nearby rooms
- Touching WAU structures → reduces health but reveals information



Puzzle interactions are kept simple. Their purpose is not to challenge, but to **set up narrative beats or move the player into tension zones**.



## TENSION RELEASE POINTS

SOMA has some of the strongest tension management in modern horror. It follows a consistent loop:

**Quiet → Discovery → Anxiety → Threat → Escape → Quiet**

Safe rooms exist, but they are not there to comfort the player; they exist to **intensify existential dread** by giving the player a brief moment to reflect on what they just saw.



Examples of release points:

- **Control rooms in Upsilon:** well-lit spaces with computers and dialogue create breathing room before entering dark, flooded corridors.
- **Data Buffer Rooms:** audio logs that expand narrative and lower tension temporarily.
- **Catherine Interaction Moments:** Scanning rooms becomes "safe" because enemies cannot enter, allowing tension to drop significantly.
- **Omicron Airlock:** the slow descent into the suit is a moment of calm before a plot-heavy sequence.



These release points are not "safe" emotionally. They offer clarity, conversation, or lore, and that clarity often makes the next horror section worse. By contrasting moments of quiet reflection with stalking encounters, SOMA keeps the tension curve dynamic and unpredictable.

## PUNISHMENT & REWARD (Psychological System)

SOMA avoids mechanical fail states as much as possible. The goal is not frustration, it's existential fear.

### Punishment

Punishment is psychological and thematic:

- **Identity destabilization:** learning that Simon is a copy destabilizes the player's understanding of themselves.
- **Environmental collapse:** the world constantly breaks, floods, and glitches, betraying the player's expectations
- **Monster encounters:** getting caught results in disorientation, visual distortion, or temporary incapacitation, reinforcing helplessness.
- **WAU interactions:** touching corrupted structures heals the player but worsens the horror thematically.



Punishment teaches the player:

**Nothing you do fully protects you. There is no victory, only persistence.**

### Reward

Rewards in SOMA are narrative, gaining understanding of the world, the WAU, and the



ethics of consciousness. Instead of giving the player power, SOMA gives the player **information**, which is sometimes more terrifying.

Rewards include:

- Access to new areas
- Understanding of consciousness transfer
- Brief moments of genuine human connection (Catherine, scans, logs)
- Progress toward the ARK project

Completing narrative objectives deepens the philosophical horror, reinforcing that **reward is also punishment** in a world built on existential dread.

## Reference

A shout-out for [SHN Survival Horror Network](#), so I could appreciate the game systems without jumping out of my seat every minute:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FD0h-s6NUeM&t=816s>

## Conclusion

SOMA's design philosophy differs from most horror games because its goal is not to scare the player with monsters but to disturb them with ideas.

By limiting player control, controlling attention through environmental cues, and grounding interactions in narrative purpose, SOMA creates a horror experience driven by *existential fear instead of simple shock*.

