

# The Good, The Ugly and The Bad in The Witness: A Retrospective

*I am the good and the bad, you're only the ugly.*

– Duke Nukem

## Introduction

The Witness is a puzzle game set in First Person View where players move around an island with different kinds of thematic zones. The game explores different philosophical themes in a thought-provoking way, exclusively exposing players to audiologs or videos of different real-world philosophers and scientists.

The style of the game is very particular in that it does not hold the player's hand except for the very first couple of in-game tutorials, choosing a remarkably well designed environment to guide players to the different content.

The game art is low-poly, colorful and pleasant to play and features a very relaxing and calm atmosphere. There is an incredible attention to detail in the design of the environments that make them feel alive, as if they talked to you. And The Witness' world has really a lot to tell. Whether it makes sense or not is up to the players, as this game only exposes information. You must do your part in finding connections and establishing conclusions.

Without further ado, let's look at what this game has to offer. However, I need to make very clear that, unlike many other analysis about this game, I provide a wide arrange of spoilers about the gameplay, narrative and atmosphere on this retrospective. This game is a remarkably good puzzle game. Do you like puzzle games? Then you should stop reading now and go play it!

This retrospective is written after I beat the main game, having only superficially done some of the side content that it includes. I beat the game without a guide and have generally read very little info about it on the web apart from the fact that it was developed by the same guy who developed Braid and that it was recommended to me as a game similar to The Talos Principle (a game I loved). This means that the meat of the text will mostly talk about the main quest, but I will try and at least give a few details on some off-the-path content without being too judgemental about it, hence risking being wrong for lack of information. I also might get some details wrong (especially regarding the narrative), so I encourage you to contact me in case any corrections should be done.

# Gameplay

The Witness features very simple controls: look around in place, walk and run. Apart from this, players can interact with the puzzles by pressing a button that will change the normal movement mode to puzzle-solving mode (a dot that players can move around appears in the middle of the screen while they remain static in place). On the puzzles themselves players can only use directional controls and confirm and cancel buttons. The goal of the game is to solve puzzles in all the different thematic zones. Once all puzzles in an area are done, a laser gets activated and pointed to the top of the only mountain on the island. Once all lasers are activated, the end-game area at the top of the mountain becomes accessible.

How are the puzzles in this game? The design is so simple that players will be led to wonder why this game seems to have such a good reputation among fans of the genre. This is because 99% of the puzzles follow a Get-Out-Of-The-Maze logic that we all played endless times as children. The puzzles in The Witness feature panels with a grid that has a start and an end point. Players solve the puzzles by drawing a line from the start to the end...

Simple enough, right? Nothing further from the truth!

The exact path players choose matters. The panels follow different rules, and here is where the design of the game really shines. This game chooses to obfuscate puzzles' rules, leaving players to discover them through analytical skills, deductive reasoning and trial and error. The rules are displayed in the panels themselves through geometric shapes. Each shape dictates a certain rule to be followed and this rule remains consistent throughout the game.

There many, many panels to be solved in The Witness. Actually, my opinion is that sometimes there are way too many panels, but more on this later.

This game doesn't just throw the puzzles randomly at players. Every location features a new rule, and explores that rule extensively with variations. In some locations (mostly featuring side content) there are also panels that may combine different rules, ramping up the difficulty.

Each location, in its starting point, tends to have a series of panels with incredibly easy solutions that are near-impossible to miss that teach you how the specific rule of the location works, and it increases the difficulty from there.

Usually these teaching panels feature one rule per panel, however sometimes they implicitly include one or two extra rules apart from the one that is more obviously being displayed (which players won't usually realize at first glance), forcing them to go back to these teaching panels for revisioning when they get stuck in further panels that more explicitly feature these implicitly told rules.

An example: a type of puzzle includes black and white squares in the grid. The teaching panels lead you to believe that you always have to strike a path between black and white squares that are next to each other. This is only because the teaching panels feature 3x3 grids at best with squares in all pieces of the grid. Further down the path come harder panels of 5x5 or 6x6 with only a couple of squares, you lead a path cutting between black and white squares that lay next to each other only to be faced with the annoying sound effect for "wrong solution". Looking back in the teaching panels the solution comes after a while... It's not that you need to go between black and white squares, they need to be completely separated in different grid zones! When you draw a path, zones are created between the path itself and the borders of the grid. If within a zone black and white squares can "access" each other, then the solution will be wrong.

The game features this kind of situation with certain frequency, and I personally think this was a brilliant design decision.

What are exactly the kind of rules we are talking about? The Witness offers great variety on this. The game mainly has rules that promote purely analytical thinking, but also feature rules that are less analytical but need greater awareness of the environment around the panel.

Let's have a look first at the analytical puzzles. Apart from the already mentioned Black-White squares puzzles, we have the following rules:

- Black pentagons are displayed between grid pieces. The solution path must go over all these black pentagons.
- Twin, mirrored paths. These panels have two starting and two ending points. Starting a path immediately has a second line starting from the second starting point that mirrors your every movement. The challenge is getting both lines to the ending points without blocking yourself, as sometimes the paths in the grid are cut.
  - A variant to this puzzle is having each line a different color and mixing it with the previous pentagon rule. The pentagons have two colors, matching the lines, and each line needs to go over the pentagons of its same color.
- Polyomino forms: from monominos to tetraminos and pentominos (shapes like Tetris figures). They are drawn in the different square grids. The path needs to circle the grid square where the shape is drawn and at the same time must have the same shape and orientation represented. Not one square less or more. The difficulty comes in panels featuring more than one polyomino, where you have to "add" the shapes. The solution path must outline the "added" shape. Another variation are hollow polyominos. These ones subtract from other polyominos in the panel.
- Upside-down Y (lambda symbol): after drawing a path from beginning to end, any depicted rule that has been wrongly met will be erased from the panel as long as this rule lies in the same region as a lambda marker. Once erased the puzzle is automatically correct. Only one lambda marker erase one rule at a time and they can't be by themselves in their own grid region, they must share the region with another wrongly met rule for them to work. The logic of this rule is sometimes quite unintuitive and makes for some of the most challenging puzzles in the game because they are always mixed with other rules.
- Colored star shapes: the drawn path in panels featuring star shapes must be done in such a way that there are always two stars of the same color in each region. If there are many stars of different colors, it doesn't matter that a region could have more than one color as long as there are two stars of each color there. However, there can't be more than two stars of the same color in any given grid region and also there can never be non-paired up stars in a region either.
  - The easier versions feature many stars of the same color and you have to separate them in pairs. More advanced panels feature many different colors in hard-to-pair positions. The hardest feature an uneven number of stars with colored squares and you have to pair the last star with a square of the same color (at the same time the rule of squares of different colors needing to be completely separated from each other still applies!)

These analytical puzzles tend to be the most time consuming and also eventually frustrating. The zones featuring these also are the ones with the highest amount of panels, which can get overwhelming and annoying. More often than not, after solving a good amount of panels, and the last set being particularly challenging, you are rewarded with another set of panels, and maybe even one further set afterwards (and yet more challenging, of course) before you finally activate the laser

of the area.

I think it's definitely one of the weak spots of the game. Nevertheless, the great design in the puzzles and the balance struck with the other kind of puzzles within the game, the environmental-awareness ones, help to ease the frustration. My personal recommendation is to keep gaming sessions for this game relatively short when dealing with these long puzzle sections.

Let's talk now about the second type of rules I have already mentioned. Rules where you have to look at the environment around the panel to find the solution to it.

We have the following rules:

- Scratches on the panel's surface that are only revealed if the panel's screen is reflecting light present on the scene, either the sun or from lightbulbs. The challenge here is to find that place around the panel (sometimes even rather far away from it) where you finally get it to reflect some light and reveal the solution (as if thousands of people have scratched it before you and the marks were left there). Some advanced panels are quite big and placed in ways where you need to find two or three different spots that reflect different light sources, as each spot only reveals part of the solution.
- Binary tree with an apple in one of the branches. The panel is no longer a grid, but a representation of a binary tree. There are many real binary trees around the panel and you need to find which one is the one represented and draw the solution path from the bottom of the tree representation to the branch where the apple is. More advanced panels feature trees with many branches and/or orientations that aren't strictly facing the panel. Some of them have had the branch where the apple was taken down but the branch is still represented in the panel, and you need to realize this to draw the correct solution.
- Actual mazes with clues. At some point, there are archetypical bush mazes with tips (like overgrown grass, marking where you shouldn't go) with a panel at the end. You need to remember which way you followed and draw it on the panel. It has many variations and sometimes you even need to meet some other rule, like drawing a polyomino somewhere in the grid (and you had to follow that shape previously, too).
- Shades from tree branches and wood decorations. Some panels in forests or houses have the shade of a tree falling on them. The branches are quite geometrical and, if you stand on the correct spot, you will realize that you can draw a line on the panel from beginning to end that avoids all branches. Sometimes the shade falls exactly on the correct places on the grid and sometimes the perspective has the shade fall above or below the correct spot and you need to take that in account to draw the solution. Sometimes it is not the light you have to follow, but the branches (the former situation has shades cut paths and fall on grid squares, the latter has shades fall exactly on paths). Sometimes the shade of other objects apart from branches also fall on the panel and you need to look at the branch directly and figure out the solution.
- The sound of animals. Some panels feature a special grid with vertical oval shapes next to each other where you always have to draw a line from left to right through the borders of these vertical ovals. These oval shapes can have a straight line cutting through the middle, giving you the option of going to the next oval through the up, middle or lower line. Close to these panels is a loudspeaker playing a bird's trill. These trills feature high, middle and low tones, which you then have to translate into the panel. If the trill had four tones and they were high-low-middle-low, that is the pattern you need to draw in the panel.
  - A variation includes the regular grid you are accustomed to see with black hexagons of three different sizes (representing the different tones). The solution path needs to meet the hexagons in the same order of the tones in the trill. These puzzles are made more difficult by playing other different different sounds (like a cellphone ring, or even other trills) on top of the correct sound, and you need to figure out which one is

the correct one.

- Colored squares featuring colors of objects near the panel. Up until this point, colored squares always needed to be isolated from each other, but there was no rule about how many of each same-color square can be in each final region of the grid after drawing the solution. Now this changes, and the key clue is that the colors seem to be finger-painted in the panel (if you look really close) instead of just being regular screen colors coming from the panel itself. You need to look around the panel to look at the colors of the objects that lay around, realize which ones are represented in the panel, and group those colors together, while isolating them from colors of other objects.
  - An example to clarify this: next to the panel there is a full dark blue flower and another flower that goes from light blue in the center to violet in the borders of the petals. The screen features various dark blue, light blue and violet squares. The drawn path needs to group together light blue and violet squares in the same region and at the same time separate them from the dark blue squares (which all need to be together in the same region too).

These environment-awareness puzzles tend to be much lighter than the previously discussed ones. They have much fewer panels before you activate the corresponding laser and are thus less heavy and cumbersome to deal with. They have their drawbacks, though. I think they fall on the softer side because realizing the rule can be actually pretty hard. Most of the time is a matter of luck, specially the very first one you bump into (which tends to be the one with the scratches on the panel). They also offer little variety, so the last few panels feel repetitive, specially in the cases where the solution is just finding the correct spot around it to stand on. You have the feeling of just aimlessly running around sometimes.

I do have to say they were my favourites, even with their shortcomings. I found all of them to be very witty and nicely designed. Especially the ones with animal sounds.

The design of these puzzles is so superb, that once you find the logic behind them, a true "A-HA!" moment surfaces and you really feel like a bad-ass. In fact this is something this game does really well, making you feel wonderful about yourself when you figure out the logic behind the different rules and are then able to solve the panels.

On the negative side, as mentioned, there are sometimes too many panels. I think the game at some areas could definitely do without some of them. Especiall the end game area, where the sheer amount of hard puzzles can be really frustrating and exhausting.

The end game area needs its own paragraph, because it has at the same time some of the best, harder, puzzles and also some that I can't really figure out what was the developer thinking when designing them.

- One of the greatest puzzles involves two different panels at opposite sides of a room with a huge drop in the middle. Drawing a path on the panels draws a real path above the drop that you can use to go from one panel to the other. You need to go back and forth and change the path on each panel a couple of times (each path blocks the other) until you are able to reach the exit. The panels have rules, and every time you change your previous drawn path, you still need to comply with them, which is what brings the main challenge here.
- Another great puzzle is a huge grid on the floor of a room and four square grids featuring each another small grid with a sub-puzzle. Each sub-puzzle has different polyomino figures and lambda markers. You need to choose the correct polyomino in each sub-puzzle and then use them as rules for the greater puzzle. This one took real time because it is mixed with twin lines, too.
- Some of the puzzles I liked less included panels with flickering bright lights in patterns absolutely not recommended for epileptics. Also panels that would rotate as you moved

through it, and rotate faster (and I mean really fast, to the point of not recognizing any shape on the panel) the further away you were from the starting point. And at last panels that would go around a very wide column to purposefully obfuscate the solution, forcing you to be constantly moving in circles. All of these were really annoying and managed to sour a bit the experience at the end coupled with the fact that there were way too many puzzles for my liking, as mentioned before.

Outside of the main game there is some side content that is often cited as the best part of the game. These puzzles follow the same logic as the panels, save that they are embedded on the environment itself and often players need to stand on a very specific spot looking at something from a very concrete angle. Then you may realize a big circle, like those signaling the starting point on a panel, followed by a line going somewhere. Then you change to puzzle-solving mode and... voila! you can indeed click on the big circle and follow the line. On these puzzles all the previous rules don't apply, they just need to have the line be drawn until the end, and most of the time getting the full line in sight is the puzzle itself.

The most common example are the lights and shadows generated from the sun that fall on the inside floor of a building. You can very clearly see the big circle and the line and reach the conclusion that you can interact with it. However, there are many, many more. And the hardest ones are very well hidden.

I can't talk a lot about them because I only found some by chance and didn't actively pursue them. There is no intrinsic reason to do that because the game doesn't compell players to do so. The reasons are exclusively extrinsic and I have to admit that I do have a problem with that sort of motivation on games. In this case in particular I also have to say that I did see there were really a lot of them. Players can discover this after solving one of these puzzles and then bumping into a kind of small black mini tower that seems to be built with car tyres and that emits a weird static noise. There is one per area in the game and they are pitch black when players first approach them. Once an environmental puzzle is solved, it will be highlighted in the tower of the area. Next to it there will be a plethora of other lines, meaning that is the amount and shape of the puzzles that are still remaining on the area. That should serve players as clues as to where to find them... If they so desire. I personally activated four towers (I solved like 7-10 environmental puzzles during my play) and most of them featured between fifteen and twenty lines.

I not only tend to dislike these kind of collectathons with no intrinsic motivation, The Witness prompts you to literally check every nook and cranny of every single place because one of these puzzles might be a line between two statues that are really far apart and seem to not have to do anything with each other, but looking from the right perspective they are shaking hands. You need to be constantly concentrated on your surroundings to find them all. And the island where The Witness takes place is not small by any chance. It is no wonder then, looking at trophy completion rates on the PS4 version, from the around 18% people that finished the main game, only 1.9% completed all these puzzles.

I want to say that I wanted to seek some of them after I was done with the main quest. But I got a very bad surprise, as I solved the last puzzle and entered an elevator-looking box, the game flies you all over the place and sets you exactly where you began... then the main menu pops up and you are forced to start a new game. This is maybe the most understandable design decision to me. It probably has to do with the themes of the game, however I think that as a designer you should somehow foretell your players that they are not going to be able to do any side content after beating the main mission.

While you don't necessarily need to solve every puzzle again to do most of the environmental

puzzles, you do need to solve a bunch of them again. And if you want to solve them all you actually need to activate all lasers again because there are a handful in the end-game area.

These last bit about being forced to start a new game did sour a bit my opinion on the game, which I otherwise liked very much in general.

## Narrative

The Witness tells its stories almost entirely through environmental storytelling, as there is no dialog in the game. There is some context given by means of audiologs scattered through the world and a little cinema you discover half way through the game. In this cinema you can watch a handful of clips for which you need their codes to play, and those codes are scattered and hidden in the island behind challenging puzzles.

Running the risk of being wrong, I'm going to give my take on what The Witness is supposed to be about.

The island is scattered with what it seems to be statues of people just going on their normal lives. I think they aren't really statues, but actual people turned into stone due to some catastrophic event they themselves caused. I think this game strongly plays into an "Atlantis" theme, a civilization (in this case just a relatively small group of people living in the island) that went too far into their pursue of scientific knowledge and triggered something they shouldn't have to.

This is further cemented by the fact that most audiologs and video clips either directly show or quote historically famous scientists, philosophers and thinkers about a range of topics ranging from the already mentioned pursue of scientific knowledge, what makes us human, what is objective truth and how perception influences it, and different philosophical and Zen themes. More specifically, many audiologs deal with how Zen proposes the "true understanding of nature" upon desestimation of pure intellectual knowledge and introduces the concept of "koans": brief, enigmatic parables or fables whose opaque and paradoxical nature is intended to "break the mind of logic".

The concept of koans links directly into the puzzles of the game, as there is no underlying logic on why we do them or what do they do when solved. They are supposed to "break our minds" to be able to put us into a superior state of "enlightment". At least according to Zen philosophy.

This little civilization does show a clear purpose of understanding nature and we can see that through the different thematical areas the island feature. Not only is the island rich in ecosystems and biomes (a good part of it is directly covered in different kinds of forests), there are certain locations that deal with the direct study of nature, like a marsh with different plant growing laboratories and a hydroponic garden dealing with the growth of different vegetables and flowers.

Going further into the theme are the already mentioned environmental-aware puzzles like the binary tree, the shadows of trees and the trills of birds. One specific place in the game is in fact a Zen temple.

This temple is important, as the end-game area gives more clues about the nature of the island being a place of "enlightment" pursue through different means. The developer cleverly included many of his early sketches and even some early models of areas of the island itself as if hinting at a laboratory that designed the different areas of the game. On the main features is many models of the Zen temple I mentioned earlier.

This kind of storytelling is not my cup of tea, but The Witness at least manages to be interesting with the many threads that it has for players to follow and make their own conclusions, even if they turn out not to be right in the end.

The Witness seems to be more about what you make of it as you play it and reflect on the puzzles, areas and audiologs that you encounter than about big reveals that explain everything at the end.

I personally think this kind of storytelling that abuses the player's apophenia is kind of weak. Apophenia is our brain's intrinsic ability of finding meaning and connections on seemingly disconnected and arbitrary elements. It's a very powerful, albeit double-edged sword, technique in game development, as players' imagination will drive them forward with great motivation. But if you abuse apophenia, this imagination will run wild and set narrative expectations that will most probably not be met at the end. As The Witness doesn't make any big reveals (except, maybe, for this kind of design laboratory that you discover in the end), I didn't find it not that big of a problem. Yet I do prefer well told, understandable stories with perhaps few loose, unimportant threads relating to side content to keep my apophenia busy. Like the story featured in a game often compared to this: The Talos Principle.

## Atmosphere

The Witness is a beautiful game and a real proof that low-poly environments can match photorealistic ones in terms of elegance and polish. Running around the island is very relaxing and interesting, as the attention to detail is superb.

This, coupled with the awesome level design in terms of player guidance and signposting, and the calm atmospheric music and sound effects, makes for a very Zen-like experience. Calm, relaxing and meditative.

The atmosphere of the game plays 100% into the themes of the game and may be its strongest point along with the wittiness of the puzzle design.

The island is very colorful and have many distinct, thematic locations:

- The starting point with a little keep and farm lands.
- A broken, abandoned shipyard.
- A desert with a pyramid-like ruin dealing with a worship to the sun.
- A binary tree forest.
- A keep that seemed to be used as a means of leisure by the people living in the island, judging by the fact that it has many people turned to stone engaging in middle-age themed live action role playing.
- A huge, rotten half-sunk ship.
- A big, colorful marsh.
- A tree house zone next to the marsh.
- A zen temple.
- A bamboo forest next to the Zen temple.
- Many different beaches.
- Underground caves.
- A big, snowy mountain.
- The end-game area, featuring a techy environment.



A special mention has to be made to a means of transport that you discover in the marsh after solving some difficult puzzles. A boat that can sail around the island, making it possible to get quickly to other areas. This boat contains a map with iconic markers of each main location drawn on it. But more importantly, next to this iconic marker there is also a geometric shape representing the rule that can be learned by doing the puzzles on that area. This map is the single, most important clue of the game and once you get it, the experience of the game changes drastically.

I specifically mention this because after activating the first laser, which can be seen as the game's tutorial, I wandered quite a lot and didn't do the keep (which, according to the trophies, is the area most players tended to do afterwards) and ended up in the marsh and finding this boat. I recommend doing the same for a better game experience.

There isn't a lot more to mention about the game's atmosphere or level design other than I haven't seen many games that match music, aesthetics and flow in such a fulfilling, satisfying way. Even the screenshots provided in this retrospective doesn't do justice. Everything fits together so beautifully and is so wonderfully crafted, that this game provides a good experience by just walking around and looking at the many pretty vistas it provides.

## **The Good, The Ugly and The Bad**

Long story short: The Witness is a great puzzle game.

If you like these kind of games it is a must-play. It is not without its flaws, but if you manage to mix the more analytical puzzles with the more environment-awareness ones, the game flows comfortably enough. It is important to note that it is better to just turn off the game or change to another area once real frustration starts to kick in. It didn't happen just once or twice that I almost instantly solved a puzzle that I spent twenty minutes trying to solve the previous day upon starting a game session.

The Good:

- One of the best puzzle designs out there. This game does a great job of making you feel like a bad ass.
- Superb environmental and atmosphere design. A truly beautiful game.
- Very thought-provoking if that's your cup of tea, but doesn't rub the themes into your face if you are just there for the puzzles and the calm atmosphere.

The Ugly:

- Some areas feature way too many sets of puzzles, sometimes making progress a real slog.
- Some environmental-aware puzzles can get quite convoluted.
- The story telling is hit or miss, specially if you don't like apophenia-abusing storytelling.
- The side, environmental puzzles have no in-game incentive to be done and may be way too many and too convoluted for most players to pursue them specifically.

The Bad:

- Some puzzles, specially at the end-game, are just plain annoying to deal with. As in, they make staring at the screen painful.

- The game forces you to start a new run upon completion without any foreshadowing, ruining any plans of doing side content that players may have.