

= The Witness (2016 video game) =

The Witness is a 3D puzzle video game developed and published by Thekla , Inc . The Witness was released for Microsoft Windows and PlayStation 4 on January 26 , 2016 , with an iOS port , among versions for other platforms , scheduled for a later date . Inspired by Myst , the game involves the exploration of an open world island filled with natural and man @-@ made structures . The player progresses by solving puzzles , which are based on interactions with mazes presented on panels around the island or hidden within the environment . The player will have to determine the rules of each puzzle from visual clues and audio recordings scattered around the island .

Jonathan Blow , the game 's lead creator and director , desired to create a game around non @-@ verbal communication , wanting players to learn from observation and to come to epiphanies in finding solutions and leading to a greater sense of involvement and accomplishment with each success . The game includes around 650 puzzles , though the player is not required to solve them all to finish the game .

Originally announced in 2009 , The Witness had a lengthy development period . Blow started work on the title in 2008 after a short break from releasing Braid . The financial success of Braid allowed him to hire a larger team , up to fifteen at its peak , to develop the title without sacrificing his vision of the final product . The team developed their own game engine to allow them greater freedom in designing the game 's visual style . Artists and building and landscape architects were retained to design the structures on the island , for a realistic feel without overcomplicating their visual representation . This required a protracted development process , and the game 's release was delayed over the next five years . Original plans for release on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 were abandoned because the game engine became too demanding . Blow opted to develop the console version for the PlayStation 4 , claiming that Sony was more open towards independent developers .

The Witness received widespread acclaim from critics , who praised the difficult , but surmountable puzzles and the game 's art and setting . Within a week of release , the game sold about as many copies as Braid had done within a year of its release , and nearly recouped all of Thekla 's development costs .

= = Gameplay = =

The Witness is a puzzle adventure game , experienced in the first @-@ person view . The player , as an unnamed character , explores an island with numerous structures and natural formations . The island is roughly divided into eleven sections , arranged around a mountain that represents the ultimate goal for the player . Within each section is a gold box that must be reached to activate it , requiring the player to complete a sequence of puzzles within that section to reach it . Once activated , a turret emerges from the box and shines a light towards the top of the mountain , indicating that section is complete . The player needs to activate some of the boxes in the game to be able to access the inside of the mountain and ultimately reach the game 's final goal , though additional puzzles can be discovered if all eleven turrets are activated . There are additional optional puzzles scattered around the island . One optional set of puzzles , accessible after entering the mountain and colloquially referred to as " The Challenge " , is a time @-@ based test to complete about a dozen algorithmically @-@ generated mazes within seven minutes , set to music from Edvard Grieg 's " Anitra 's Dance " and " In the Hall of the Mountain King " . The final game has more than 650 puzzles , which Jonathan Blow estimates will take the average player about 80 hours to solve . The puzzles include one that Blow believed that less than 1 % of the players would be able to solve .

All puzzles are based on a mechanic of tracing a path through a maze @-@ like route from a starting point , represented as a circle , to a goal point , represented as a line segment with a rounded end , without crossing one 's path . The goal of these puzzles is not always to simply complete the maze but to find the right path that completes the puzzle correctly . Mazes may have several starting points and goals ; the player may have to find the right starting point that can complete the maze , or they may have to figure out how to reach a specific end point to trigger an

event in the surrounding environment such as moving a platform . The puzzles include a symbolic language that denotes the mechanics for that maze . For example , puzzles that present mazes with black and white squares in the spaces between traceable paths require the player to find a path through the maze that separates these squares by color . Other puzzles require the player to use the environment to determine how to solve the puzzle , such as studying a nearby tree with branches that mimic the puzzle , or by observing symbols on nearby floors and walls that align with the puzzle 's configuration . The puzzles within each island section are based on common mechanic , often with a sequence of puzzles appearing early in each section that are designed to help the player identify and understand the mechanic and meaning of the symbols . Later puzzles combine two or more different mechanics into the same puzzle using the consistent symbolic language .

Most puzzles are located on recognizable eye @-@ level panels scattered around the island , often connected with power cables that light up once a puzzle is solved and guiding the player to the next puzzle . Some puzzles these panels incorporate the game 's architecture , such as one puzzle that requires the player to view background elements through a semi @-@ transparent puzzle panel to determine the solution . There are also non @-@ obvious puzzles built into the environment itself , requiring the player to find the correct vantage point to complete the puzzle . At any time , the player can engage the maze @-@ drawing mode , which is marked by a white border on screen . While in this mode , the player 's avatar is prevented from moving and instead allows the player to use their controls to trace the path through a presented maze . The mode ends once the player solves the puzzle or cancels the mode . Normally , this mode is activated in front of a panel , moving the player 's view directly to the panel to solve it , but it can also be activated at any other time to engage those puzzles that are based on vantage points . Nearly all puzzles provide immediate feedback if they have been solved correctly or not through sound effects or visual indication .

Puzzles in a given section of the island are presented in a non @-@ linear fashion , and with the open world nature of the game , the player may encounter puzzle panels that they have yet to learn the symbolic language for . As such , players are not required to finish a puzzle once they start , and can leave and wander to any other area to solve the puzzles there , potentially gaining insight on the new symbolic language or inspiration for difficult solutions . Blow has stated that there is more to the game than these mazes , in response to concerns from players ; to Blow , " the point is the magic that happens in the player 's mind when he understands the subtle things that the mazes are saying - because the mazes aren 't just puzzles , they are lines of communication that aggregate , become more complex and eventually say surprising things " .

Throughout the island are stations with audio recordings that provide insightful quotes for the player , from people such as Buddha , B.F. Skinner , and William Kingdon Clifford . Voice actors for these logs include Ashley Johnson , Phil LaMarr , Matthew Waterson , and Terra Deva . The player can also encounter a theater where short video clips , such as from James Burke 's Connections series or the ending of Andrei Tarkovsky 's Nostalgia , can be viewed . A number of visual illusions based on depth perception from the player 's position can be found in the game 's environment , such as two seemingly @-@ disparate humanoid figures at different parts of the island that appear to be holding hands when viewed from the right position and angle .

= = Development = =

= = = Concept = = =

The Witness was envisioned after Jonathan Blow released Braid . After seeing the title become a success in 2008 , Blow took time off from " serious development " , and instead spent time to prototype new game concepts , spending a few months on each . The concept that proved to be the basis for The Witness was the one prototype that Blow considered to be " very ambitious and challenging " . He considered it risky as it would include the development of a 3D gameplay engine , and feared that he would " fall back to square one " , this being his state of living before the success of Braid , should it fail . Despite the challenges , Blow continued to go forward with The Witness , as

it was also the most compelling of the prototypes he had crafted . Direct development work on the title began in late 2008 .

The game concept itself is based on an earlier title that Blow had envisioned but never completed . In this unfinished title , there was a side gameplay aspect that has a " magic moment " , according to Blow , that would have made the title exciting . The Witness 's gameplay is based on distilling out this " magic moment " from the previous concept game , and wrapping it within its own game and story . Blow has compared this moment to a spoiler for a movie , and thus has avoided disclosure of the mechanic or other aspects of the game . The maze panel idea bore out from an earlier idea that Blow had around 2002 for a game involving wizards which the player would cast spells through mouse gestures , a popular element of video games at the time , with the ability to modify the effect of the spells by slight alterations of specific gestures ; elements of The Witness 's story borrow from this game concept .

One goal of the The Witness was to demonstrate video games as an art form , " exploring the different flavors of non @-@ verbal communication that games can have , which I think is important to understanding games as a medium " , according to Blow . The game 's name The Witness is derived from core gameplay aspect of making the player perceptive of the surroundings to discover meaning and solutions to the puzzles without verbal communication , a similar approach taken by Myst (1993) . Blow attributes much of The Witness 's design to Myst , a game that got him into video game development . One aspect of Myst that Blow desired to correct was the nature of " pixel hunting " in some of its puzzles ; the player would have to click on various parts of the virtual machinery without knowing what the end result was until sometime later in the puzzle . Within The Witness , Blow created a unifying mechanic for all the puzzles to avoid this confusion , using the maze panels as this mechanic . While the interaction mechanics are the same for all these mazes , the rules and behavior described by the game 's symbolic language that limit or result from the interactions form the core of the puzzles in the game . The island was divided into sections so that all the information the player needed to understand the specific behavior of puzzles in that section would be in one general location , a means to " [cut] down a lot of ambiguity that used to exist in adventure games " . Puzzles within the game were designed to be meaningful within the context of the game , rather than to be simply a puzzle to be solved , and further aimed to be different from any other puzzle within the game .

Part of the game 's concept is a balance between puzzle @-@ solving and perception , giving the player the freedom to explore The Witness 's world and creating a non @-@ linear approach to gameplay . Two of the first puzzles Blow had created involved " clues in objects that populate the world " , which led him to recognize he needed to create a world to support these puzzles . This would form a dichotomy between exploration and puzzle solving , which " made a lot of sense " to Blow . Blow created the island as open world , so that players can leave puzzles they are stuck at and work at other ones , as to avoid punishing the player for not being able to solve a key puzzle , a common issue with other adventure games according to Blow . Blow wanted puzzles to be clearly presented in the open and without any red herrings , an approach he had taken with Braid . Exploration is encouraged through the game 's narrative , which are told by audio logs the player can find on the unpopulated island ; through these , Blow attempted to create a " feeling of loneliness in a beautiful space " for the player . Because these logs can be found in any order , Blow hopes that each player may have a different perception of the narrative depending on how they have approached the game . Initially , these audio logs were to be more story @-@ driven , but Blow opted later to change these out for more obfuscated and obtuse information , similar to the text elements used in Braid , as to avoid directly relating out the story of the game for the player and let them think about what the narrative means instead . Blow 's team designed the narrative that those that solve more of the puzzles will gain more of a concrete understanding of the story .

Due to the nebulous nature of the story in The Witness , Blow designed the game to avoid simply " rewarding the player " through enticing or forcing the player to proceed through fixed actions simply to gain some achievement . Instead , the game was designed to give the player the option to explore and learn about the world he created for the game , and to come to epiphanies on the puzzles on their own . Blow designed to use as few achievements as required by the chosen

consoles , seeing these as simply means to reward the player . Blow also states his concerns on other pop @-@ up messages that could occur on the consoles or computer versions , as he considers The Witness a " subtle kind of game " with quiet ambient audio that these pop @-@ ups detract from .

Blow acknowledged that The Witness was an intellectually difficult game , intentionally not developed for a mass audience . He considers his approach " anti @-@ Nintendo " , providing few to no additional instructions to the player in contrast with typical Nintendo games . In contrast to most games developed at the time that Blow considered " treat [ed] [their players] as the lowest common denominator " , he wanted the audience for The Witness to be for the player that " is inquisitive and likes to be treated as an intelligent person " . He compared the approach he took with The Witness to that of Thomas Pynchon 's Gravity 's Rainbow , as the novel " isn ' t holding your hand the whole way through to make sure you understood every paragraph " , and believed he could do the same within a video game . The game 's timed challenge featuring randomly generated puzzles was purposely designed to be difficult , according to Blow , intended to be " about testing how deeply a player has internalized the rules to the puzzles and how quickly they can react to new configurations " .

= = = Funding and development = = =

The Witness was announced in 2009 following the release of Jonathan Blow 's previous game , Braid . At the time , Blow had no firm plans for release or publication of the game , and had allocated a budget of about \$ 800 @, @ 000 for the game .

Blow created the Thekla , Inc. team for the development and publication of The Witness . Since December 2009 , Blow was working remotely with two additional full @-@ time roles , one a 3D artist , and another as a technical programmer . By 2015 , Blow stated there were about eight full @-@ time members on his team , though had had ten to eleven people involved around 2011 , and as many as fifteen at its peak . The Witness incorporates other artists and programmer 's contributions in smaller roles , such as David Hellman , who had previously worked with Blow on Braid 's art design and worked on conceptualizing the design of The Witness . Other contributors include Eric Urquhart , who has provided 3 @-@ D concept artwork for the game , and Ignacio Castaño , who has developed a rendering system for the game 's illumination and visual effects . Blow gives much credit to Orsolya Spanyol , a freshly @-@ graduated graphic artist he hired around 2011 , for transforming the original sparse imagery of the island to the more vivid scenery that was included in the final game . By diversifying work on the game , Blow has been able to focus more of his time on the core game design , allowing his team to implement his vision , in contrast to the development of Braid where he also had to program much of the game himself .

The Witness took seven years to complete . Blow attributes this long period to the expansion of the game 's scope as he and his team continued to work on it . He opted against time and cost @-@ saving solutions that would have affected his ambition for the game , such as condensing the game 's scope or using an off @-@ the @-@ shelf game engine . Instead , he used revenues from sales of Braid , totaling around \$ 4 million as of April 2014 , into development costs . Blow had to seek out additional capital in February 2015 having exhausted the Braid revenues , but believed that regardless of the costs of extra development time , the debt would be justified in the long run . Final development costs were estimated at just under \$ 6 million . While Blow considers The Witness as an indie game due to the lack of funding or support from a major publisher , he also feels the scope of the project by time and cost to be closer to that of what a AAA studio would produce , and represents a new type of game development in the industry .

The Witness uses its own engine developed by Blow and his team , which took a significant portion of the development time . Blow was insistent on using his own game engine instead of an existing solution such as Unity , as he would be able to fully control every element of a game engine that he created himself . As a compact game world compared to open @-@ world games , the whole of the island of The Witness was treated as one zone , simplifying the gameplay and engine development . This presented a secondary challenge to the team as to concurrently work on the project , they

needed to find a means to allow multiple developers to edit areas without resorting to using locking on their version control system as well as being able to work without being connected to a central server . Blow and his team developed an unconventional means of serializing the game world into text files that would have revision control while at the same time making it easy for individuals to discover conflicting edits . They also converted the 10 @,@ 000 @-@ some entities in the game world into their own individual files for tracking to further reduce conflict between edits . Other features of this system including using defined control points for terrain elements to automatically recalculate seamless connections between them within the game 's rendering engine , and a built @-@ in world editor within the game engine to easily access existing serialized elements and create new ones .

The development team had incorporated support for upcoming virtual reality (VR) hardware within The Witness , following a November 2013 meeting between Blow and two Valve Corporation developers demonstrating their upcoming SteamVR technology , which Blow found to help enhance the player 's ability to explore the island . Though the technical support for VR is present in the released game , The Witness was not designed to take advantage of virtual reality , as many of the puzzles could be " cheated " if the head movement could be separated from the body movement , according to programmer Andrew Smith .

= = = Design , art , and sound = = =

The design and layout of the island in The Witness has been nearly consistent since the start of the game 's development , with the team working on populating the world with specific puzzles , and detailing the landscape and other art assets . Sam Machkovech , a writer for Ars Technica that had played a demo of the game in 2012 and again in 2015 , noted that the island had remained familiar between these two sessions . One aspect of the design of the game world is the use of power cables running across the island , connecting puzzle panels to the mechanics they control . Blow found these to help in the initial parts of the game to provide " extreme clarity " of where the player was to go next , but discovered that this also made the game too much of a grind of repeating the same pattern . Over the course of development , the power cable aspects were still kept , but the designers changed up how easy they were to trace across the landscape as a means to guide the player towards potential objectives .

The island has been structured to provide a fair mix of puzzle solving , exploration , and narrative elements while avoiding a " paradox of choice " by giving the player too much freedom and not knowing where to go next . According to artist Luis Antonio , one of the first things that Blow wanted the player to see was the mountain to make them aware as this being their ultimate goal . The game initially started the player in an abandoned bunker converted to living space , but as it was originally arranged , the player would exit the bunker not facing the mountain . Though they attempted to move and rotate the bunker space around to meet Blow 's goal , it was ultimately scrapped in favor of a simpler space with interior elements that fit with other portions of the game , and which the player would climb out into the external environment with the mountain in full view . This introductory area was also meant to serve as the game 's tutorial , helping players to understand fundamental mechanics of one must switch between solving puzzles and exploring the environment to find others , and Thekla spent a great deal of time fine @-@ tuning the details to be clear without verbal explanation . The team 's artists worked to support Blow 's objective of guiding the player by using contrasts of color and of natural and man @-@ made structures to highlight areas that the player would be drawn towards . Blow wanted the game 's art to start off with bright colors and high saturation , to present a type of optimism to the player , while later settings in the game would become less bright . He also wanted to make sure all elements of the game world stood out to avoid visual noise within the game that may have interfered with puzzle solving . To accomplish this , he and his team often had to review the game as if they were a new player to it , and identify what elements they were visually drawn to ; this would often identify features of the island they had incorporated early on but were no longer appropriate for the final game .

The art style was influenced by a simplification approach , eliminating enough details but keeping

overall shapes to make objects clearly recognizable . According to Antonio , they took inspiration for simplification from real @-@ world photography , artwork , and from the environments of the games Journey , Team Fortress 2 , and Mirror 's Edge . They still wanted to ensure that a player would be able to recognize an area of the island they were in based on the visual appearance , such as by the types of trees around them , and assured there was enough distinction while simplifying the assets to make this possible . Blow 's team was also able to engage with Fourm Design Studio , a real @-@ world architecture firm , and Fletcher Studio , a landscape architecture team , to help develop the environments for The Witness . According to Fourm 's founder , Deanna Van Buren , they developed the various manmade and cultivated areas based on the concept of three different civilization periods , with later civilizations building on the structures from earlier ones and repurposing these structures as needed . Their studios helped to bring design principles to the main development team , allowing them to then extrapolate their own ideas for the final game . Blow said that the guidance and advice of the architects helped to craft the island in a way that " feels more immersive just because the details are in place , and your brain kind of picks up on it " . Blow gives an example of how many of the buildings on the island are in various states of deterioration , but were designed as fully detailed and complete structures and purposely worn down to create the ruined look ; the resulting structures retain logically @-@ consistent details , such as the remains of wooden support posts for rotted @-@ away stairways in a castle , that aid in immersion for the player .

The final game shipped with very little music , instead relying on the ambient sounds of the environment which was developed by Wabi Sabi Sound . Blow felt that the addition of music was a " layer of stuff that works against the game " . The ambient sound effects were made more difficult to include as the island the game takes place on lacks any other animal @-@ based lifeform , making the player aware how alone they are while on the island . Most of the ambient sounds were recorded by Andrew Lackey of Wabi Sabi Sound , capturing them while walking around Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay . Lackey layered the various sound effects as to enable many different variations depending on the player 's location on the island while also providing seamless transition from one environment to the next .

= = = Marketing and release = = =

The game was quietly revealed to the public by Blow at the 2010 Penny Arcade Expo with the help of independent developers Chris Hecker and Andy Schatz , who were sharing booth space for demonstrations of their own games , SpyParty and Monaco : What 's Yours Is Mine ; the two provided a table for demonstrating The Witness without any signs or other markings . Blow wanted to keep the demonstration subtle and a surprise and to see players ' reactions without the pressure of other players waiting in line to also try the game . Blow himself was present at the Expo but kept his distance from the demonstration table . The fact that The Witness was playable at the Expo was only fully revealed after the Expo by both Blow and Stephen Totilo of Kotaku , who saw and played the game but did not mention its presence until later . Players who tried the game at PAX or saw footage of it from the Kotaku article afterwards became concerned that The Witness would simply be a series of mazes to solve . Blow reiterated that there is more to the game than mazes , and that he encountered similar problems when trying to promote Braid , in that seeing videos of portions of the game does not serve to demonstrate " what happens in the player 's mind during the puzzle @-@ solving process " .

At the time of the 2010 reveal , Blow had anticipated to release The Witness on Microsoft Windows and iOS devices , and on an unspecified set of consoles , including possibly the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 . Later that year , Blow restated his stance , and felt that there would be no console release on initial release , considering the amount of additional programming time and limitations of the console platforms . In November 2011 , Blow was able to hire two more programmers , and had rethought the release for consoles ; while he could not commit to a console release initially , the additional labor would help make it possible to have one console version ready at the time of the game 's launch , with the version for other consoles to be made available at a later time . As the

game 's development progressed and it 's engine become more complex , Blow opted to forgo the development of seventh generation console versions , citing their " relatively low system specs " .

Around 2012 , development of The Witness for the next @-@ generation of consoles with improved hardware capabilities became a possibility , and Blow and his team started looking at this opportunity . They had discounted the Wii U , again citing low specs , and decided to choose between the PlayStation 4 and the Xbox One platform . At the time of this decision , Sony was able to provide hardware information and development kits . Sony has also sought out independent developers like Blow to learn about the upcoming PlayStation 4 in preparation for its launch , while Microsoft had not yet released firm specifications for their console . Blow opted to go with the PlayStation platform ; this decision was also aided by representatives from Sony that were interested in bringing the game to their system , and a larger trend of Sony to bring more downloadable and independently @-@ developed games to their next console in contrast to Microsoft 's tighter controls . Blow affirmed that there was no monetary deal involved with this decision . Blow also later acknowledged that he has had difficulties working with Microsoft in the past , and had previously explained several of the issues he had to go through with Microsoft to release his earlier game , Braid . The Witness had been planned as a launch @-@ window title for the PlayStation 4 in 2013 , a time @-@ limited console exclusive . The Windows and iOS versions , at this point , were planned to be released alongside the PlayStation 4 version , barring any development delays that Blow and his team encountered . Other console versions would come later , if they opted to develop for them .

The Witness remained in development , missing the planned 2013 release while Blow and his team continued to improve and fine @-@ tune the game . In September 2015 , Blow announced that the game 's release was set for January 26 , 2016 , simultaneously for PlayStation 4 and Microsoft Windows , with the iOS version to follow shortly thereafter . Though the ESRB rated the title for the Xbox One just prior to the game 's release , Blow clarified that they presently have no plans for release on that platform , only acquiring the ESRB rating for that console platform at the same time as the other confirmed versions to avoid having to redo this step prior to release in the future . About a week before its release , Blow announced that the game would be priced at \$ 40 , an amount he said " fairly reflective of what the game is " . The value was met with some criticism as a high price for an indie game . Game journalists believe the price is justified given the estimated 100 @-@ hour playtime Blow has stated , as well as comparing it to a similar puzzle game , The Talos Principle (2014) , that was also released for the same price . To help promote the game , the development team created three " long screenshot " videos , inspired by the experimental film Koyaanisqatsi , that slowly panned across the island and its features without additional commentary .

Blow stated that they had been in discussions with publishers for a physical release of the game , but opted to not do that step initially , citing the additional time that would have been needed for the manufacturing and distribution processes . However , with the game completed and released digitally , they are looking to potential retail versions .

Following release , some players reported getting motion sickness due a combination of the narrow field of view used by the game and the bobbing of the player 's viewpoint simulating motions during walking . Blow stated they are working on a patch to allow players to adjust their field of view , disable the head bobbing , and enable faster movement options .

= = Reception = =

The Witness received critical acclaim on release . It currently holds an aggregated Metacritic score of 87 / 100 for Microsoft Windows based on 20 reviews , and 87 / 100 for PlayStation 4 based on 82 reviews .

Chloi Rad of IGN awarded the game a perfect score of 10 / 10 , calling it a masterpiece and stating that it is " [a] beautiful , powerful , and cleverly designed puzzle game with a wealth of mysteries to unravel . " Brenna Hillier from VG247 praised the game 's use of a first @-@ person perspective to present what otherwise could have been a simple series of puzzle boards , and was impressed by the steep learning curve that the puzzles presented , " impossible , incomprehensible puzzles melt

into simple exercises after you've visited nearby locations". Aaron Riccio of Slant Magazine found that there was a "jarring shift" once the player reached the puzzles inside the mountain, with puzzles that relied more on obfuscation in a more clinical environment, contrasting with the rest of the island.

Jake Muncy of Wired, though impressed with the game, noted that the lack of any narrative or gameplay guidance could cause "players to bounce off [the game] entirely". Further, on completing the game, Muncy believed that though Blow had compared his game to the novel Gravity's Rainbow, it failed to create a vivid living setting in the island in contrast to the novel as to make it an engaging work. Oli Welsh of Eurogamer praised the game's puzzles for providing numerous "eureka" moments to the player and considered the title as the video game analog of the Goldberg Variations, but felt that the narrative atop the puzzles was "self-absorbed and wilfully obscure", and believed that it could have been omitted, as Blow and his team "needn't have tried to make a puzzle out of art when he had already, so beautifully and so successfully, made art out of puzzles". Justin McElroy of Polygon gave the game an 8 / 10 rating, describing it as "uplifting but frustrating"; he criticized the length of time involved in solving certain puzzles while expressing concern that less patient players would take shortcuts. "That will naturally lead to more cheating. It will snowball." Bob Mackey of US Gamer was more critical of the game, giving it 2 of 5 stars. Though initially praising its visuals and setting, Mackey found the puzzles to be very difficult and "there's simply too much going on to give me the proper feedback about what I'm getting wrong", suggesting that "Blow was maybe a little too close to his work".

Several theories have been proposed as to the meaning of the story in The Witness. In attempting to analyzing the meaning of the game, David Roberts of GamesRadar felt that The Witness was about the nature of epiphanies within the scope of epistemology, the theory of knowledge. Roberts stated that as one proceeds through the puzzles in the game, the player begins to recognize other elements of the island setting as puzzles, and to obtain the game's credit sequence (the "true ending" as stated by Roberts), the player solves such an environmental puzzle built into one of the first puzzles they would encounter on the island: "the end of your journey becomes the beginning, and the beginning leads to the end - the very cycle of epiphany".

Within a week of release, Blow stated that sales of The Witness had nearly outsold what Braid had done during its first year of release. He later specified that first week sales were over 100,000 copies with gross revenues over \$5 million, on track to break even with development costs, with which Thekla will start considering porting the game to other platforms, potentially including iOS, Android, OS X, and Xbox One. During this time, Blow observed that the Windows version of The Witness was one of the top downloads through illegal BitTorrent sites, comparable to what he had seen for Braid. He had opted to forgo strong digital rights management for the title, as he believes "people should have the freedom to own things", but has said he may change his mind and software piracy controls "might happen on the next game".