How I Defeated a Supervillain Game Designer

By Phil Hornshaw

March 21, 2016

The Witness, created by the studio headed by well-known indie developer Jonathan Blow, seems to be about chilling out.. undefined

After having worked through the game over many, many hours, that's about the biggest takeaway I can glean. Blow made a virtual island resort full of relaxing puzzles and nice views. Solve them at your leisure and they will unlock more puzzles, and you'll feel dumb until you crack one and feel super smart. That's about it.

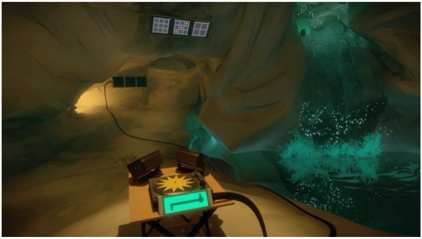
Of course, I didn't know that when I was playing it. When I was playing it, *The Witness* seemed strange and mysterious, with some deeper secret that needed uncovering. After all, you wake up on this weird island in the far end of a dark metal tube. Who put you there? Where is everyone? What's with these overly lifelike statues that seem to appear out of nowhere? How does one escape this hellish prison of palm trees and logic problems?

As I moved through the game, I started to feel as if I was personally contending with Blow. He'd trapped me here on his sinister island. "No, Mr. Hornshaw—I expect you to die," I imagined him cackling (despite the fact that there's nothing threatening on the island at all and you can't even throw yourself off a cliff accidentally). And then I cracked a puzzle hidden in a weird hedge maze and said to myself, "Very clever, Mr. Blow," in my best terrible Sean Connery accent.

It's important to understand what it's like to play *The Witness*. Playboy.com Gaming Editor Mike Rougeau does a pretty good job of summing up the way the game can get into your skull and beat up your brain. You really *do* start to feel like Blow is just messing with you, like you're trapped on his stupid puzzle island, unable to unlock the clearly awesome, super-shrouded secrets, and he's laughing at you from his orbital space station or volcano lair.

When you manage to best a puzzle that's been waylaying you, though, it's always a moment of angry triumph. At some point, you start to feel pretty goddamn smart as you work your way through *The Witness*. You survey the land as it bows before your incredible mental might, its many weird lasers unlocked and shining toward the mountaintop where undoubtedly you're meant to head next, and you think, "Damn, where's my MENSA application?" You figure if you were less lazy (and maybe played fewer video games) you'd have had a fair shot at being an astronaut. No big deal.

And then you find it. "The Challenge."



Deep in a hidden cave, accessible only by a hidden door, which is itself opened by a hidden puzzle, there exists a series of strange, deactivated screens. At the far end of this cave you discover a small turntable with a record on it. Play that record, and you begin to embark on something that's not found anywhere else on the island of *The Witness*: a timed puzzle extravaganza meant to crush your very soul.

Start the record (it contains Edvard Grieg's "Anitra's Dance" and "In the Hall of the Mountain King," which gives the whole thing a ridiculous *Looney Tunes* feel, perfect because you are most definitely the Elmer Fudd of this entire experience) and, suddenly, panels start lighting up. They contain versions of the puzzles you've seen before, scattered throughout the island. Only this time, you have to solve them as quickly as you can—and they're random.

"OK," I think. "No problem. I've just dedicated a week to solving these dumb puzzles. It sucked a few hundred times, but I've laid waste to all that was arrayed before me. I've got this."

(Please press play on the above playlist, and then continually refresh it once it hits the 15:28 mark, until you finish reading to unlock the *true* Challenge experience.)

I can't figure out the first puzzle. The record runs out and all the screens go blank again.

"So, Mr. Blow—that's how it's going to be," Imaginary Sean Connery growls from the couch beside me.

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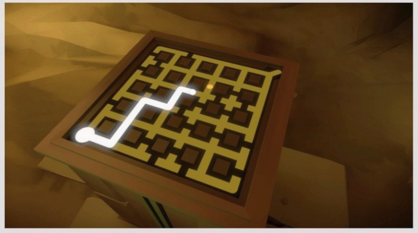
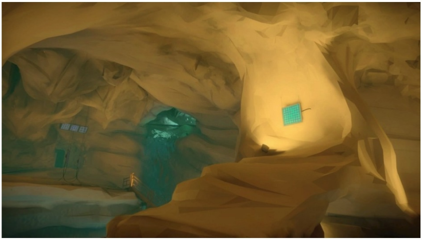


Start again. This time I clear the first three panels in the record room and sprint down a narrow tunnel, where I find a puzzle on a tabletop. I spend an extra few seconds staring at it before I realize that it's actually incredibly simple—a ruse!—and quickly tear down into the next room. This one has multiple rock shelves with panels scattered around, but they're not turned on. They're supposed to be turned on. What the hell?

It's not a bug, though; like everything on this island, it's a feature meant to reinforce your resentment toward your ancestors for not passing you down better genes. There are four panels in this room and they activate in order as you solve each one. They're kind of hidden. And the order in which they switch on changes.

The record runs out. Time to head back to the start.

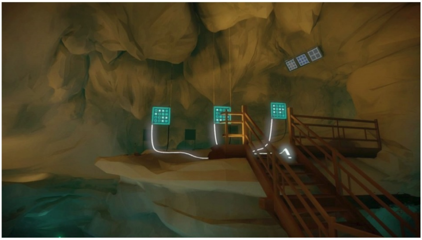


Add, like, four more attempts to this as I figure out where all the panels are (there's one in a little alcove underneath two others and I keep missing it) and that you have to run all the way back around one of them because there's no good way to walk up to it.

Attempt 6: Finally getting the hang of this. I start the record, clear the first three panels, plow past that little table, quickly run around the cave and find all four puzzles in the right order, and cross a bridge over a small stream. Three panels stand before me, with a different kind of puzzle—it's one of the ones where you have to use lines to separate black and white dots from one another.

I try to solve it. Can't. Try again. Can't again. Frustrated, I bail on that one and try the one next to it. Can't solve it either. Try three times. Record runs out. Goddammit.

Attempt 7: Play the record, solve the first three panels, solve the table, solve the next four in random order, and get back to the panels with the black and white dots. Try to solve the first one. Can't. Try again. Can't again. As the record runs out I'm getting physically angry, and I definitely hate Edvard Grieg.



Attempt 8: I hit a panel that doesn't make sense in one of the random puzzles earlier in the cave, give up in a huff, and start over.

Attempt 9: Did the table suddenly get harder?

Attempt 10: The difficulty spike on the first of the three black and white panels seems insane, so I skip over to the panel to the left of it and solve it *immediately*. And the next set of three lights up.

Oh Jon Blow, you clevah bashtahd, imaginary Sean Connery shouts. Only one of these three panels needs to be solved to move forward, and two of them have no solution! The record runs out as I'm seething with rage.

Attempt 11: Armed with new knowledge, ready to solve this whole thing, I—I can't seem to find the solvable black and white panel.

Attempt 12: I screw it up here too.

Attempt 13: Clear the black and white one and reach the next group, another set of three panels. They're the same as the black and white ones, but with more colors, and it's immediately clear that two of the three are impossible. I finally know what I'm doing here.

Attempt 14: I screw it up. Imaginary Sean Connery is disappointed.

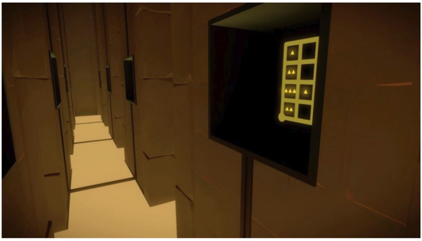
Attempt 15: I screw it up again.

Attempt 16:

Attempt 17: Remember to breathe.

Attempt 21: Finally, I push through the two sets of almost-impossible panels. There's only one place to go next—into a room filled with square pillars, with a screen built into each side of each one.

And here's where Blow pulls a fast one: The room is a maze. Once activated, walls pop up to obstruct your path through it. You can't see the right way through until you run into a wall, and it changes each time. Somewhere in this maze are two screens that need solving.



We'll be here a while.

Attempt 23: Halfway through the maze this time! Just need to find that second panel...

Attempt No Longer Keeping Track: Fuck this maze. Who would design this shit. It feels like this:

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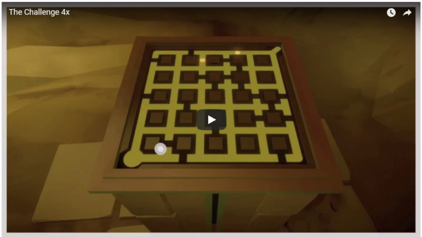
Except forever.

Here's the entire Challenge so far at the speed it feels like in your brain under pressure:



Attempt Why Am I Still Doing This To Myself: I just snapped at my wife for no good reason because Jon Blow is making me a bad husband.

Attempt This Is Costing Me An Entire Saturday: Rage level: Shatner.

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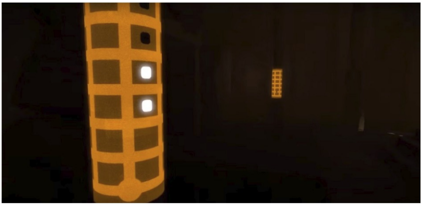
BLOOOOOOOOOOOOW!

Finally make it through the maze to the final challenge of the challenge: These two goddamn things right here.



Regular puzzles pasted onto round pillars, meaning you can't see the whole puzzle while you're solving it. They're not impossible by any means, but under the gun, they suck. Like all of this.

Attempt No Seriously I'm Smarter Than This: OK. OK. OK. Hang on. Find your center. Re-evaluate. You can do this. It's a video game. And you are greater than a video game.

I set the controller down for a moment and try to think. There's a way to beat this. There is no spoon.

There is no spoon.

Attempt There is No Spoon: Goddammit.

Attempt I Know Kung Fu: Son of a bitch!

Attempt I'm Too Annoyed to Come Up With Clever Movie References:

Attempt I Hate My Stupid Brain: It has been hours. Most of a Saturday is gone. But I refuse to be defeated.

Here we go. I've finally got the timing down to the point where, if things don't go my way, I know to bail and start over. I've got this.

Bring it on, Blow.

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Burn through the first panels. Smash through the scattering in the cave. Quickly find the two possible puzzles among the impossible ones. Bounce around the maze for a while. And finally find it—the last panel.

Holy shit it could happen.

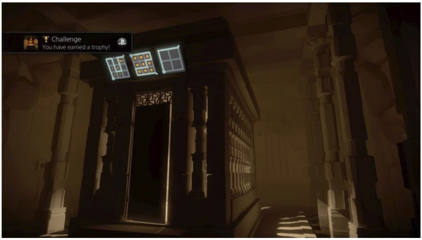
“In the Hall of the Mountain King” is kicking into high gear as I finally start the first pillar. And then—disaster.

I keep messing up the pillar panel. I have to separate black and white squares and I can't see the whole puzzle at once and I keep blowing it and—oh. Wait. Nevermind. Got it.

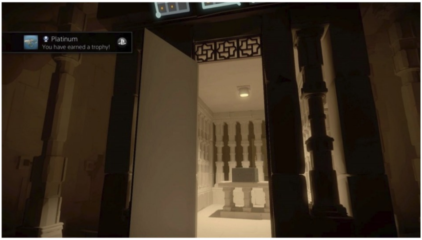
Sprint to the final one. “Mountain King” is going crazy and I'm about to have an aneurism. If I fail now I'm turning in my copy of *The Witness* and retiring from games writing. At the very least, I'm probably going to put a controller through some drywall.

I restart the last panel. Stall. Restart it again. There's only seconds remaining.

And then.

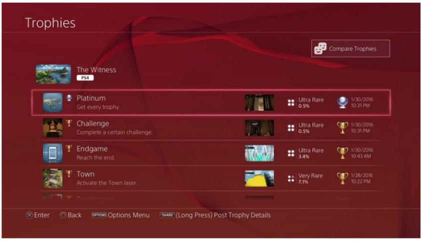


Oh dear god.



It's over.

I have done it. I leap to my feet and start shouting and my cats freak out and go bolting out of the room. *The Witness* rewards me with a weird in-game video and a digital trophy that tells me how much smarter I am than everyone else who plays this game (at the time, only 0.5 percent of everyone who'd played the game had completed this thing).


Trophies

The Witness
PS4

Platinum Get every trophy.	Ultra Rare 0.5%	1/30/2016 10:31 PM
Challenge Complete a certain challenge.	Ultra Rare 0.5%	1/30/2016 10:31 PM
Endgame Reach the end.	Ultra Rare 3.4%	1/30/2016 10:43 AM
Town Activate the Town laser.	Very Rare 7.1%	1/28/2016 10:22 PM

Really, most of a Saturday, a huge amount of frustration and much of my dignity were a worthy trade for some recognition from a video game, and from imaginary Sean Connery.

And now that I've defeated Jon Blow, I've probably absorbed all his powers. Like video game *Highlander*.

Whew. It's over.

BRB. Insane now.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel *and* The Space Hero's Guide to Glory. *He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.*

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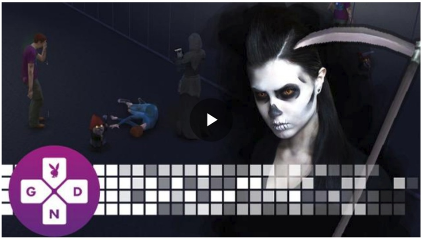

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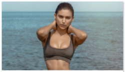

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