

Internally Enacted Narratives: Jonathan Blow's *The Witness*

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a close reading and analysis of Jonathan Blow's self-reflexive 2016 title, *The Witness*, in order to unpack some of the meaning its puzzles produce. We argue that Blow's work has significant intellectual value in its critique of play and games, which can be found housed in a non-linear sequential presentation of puzzles. At no point do the game's puzzles require the discovery of additional virtual tools, in order for them to be possible. Instead, Blow demands that the player develop an understanding of how various game mechanics operate. As a result, the apparent openness of the world in which players find themselves leads to soft barriers - puzzles with mechanics that one does not know how to interpret yet. This logic becomes so ingrained that, when confronted with unintelligible puzzles, the player's ideal response is not to try harder or give up, but to seek simpler lessons elsewhere, to hone one's mind and then return to re-confront the unknowable. In constructing the world in this way, Blow uses videogame architecture in novel ways pushing Henry Jenkins' thought on narrative architectures (2001) as well as Jesper Juul's work on failure in games (2013).

The Witness' puzzles are initially radically abstracted from the world. The lush, high-contrast 3D environment acts as a backdrop to the low-fi 2D line drawing games that populate the space. As the player becomes comfortable with the flat puzzle spaces however, Blow brings the environment into the collection of obstacles. Branches cast shadows that interfere with the puzzle grid, glare from the sun gives necessary hints, and the artefacts nearby offer the astute observer access to needed information. The player quickly finds that a physical approach to the puzzle becomes relevant in discovering these hints, making both the environmental context and the vector of the player's arrival important. Physically nudging the player perspective to view a puzzle from a different angle sometimes makes progress possible. Eventually, this apparent barrier between 2D and 3D is further eroded as puzzles begin to reshape the environment beyond simply opening doors or boxes. Platforms and boats become tied to the fate of the selected solution, the puzzles acting as remote controls. Eventually, the player's mind can come to

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understand that the world hides the same puzzles in its 3D architecture and that the 2D line drawing mechanic is not excluded from this space. It is not that these opportunities to “play” the world didn’t exist beforehand, but that such an approach would not likely dawn upon the player until primed to think in such an initially unintuitive way. This process of learning and empowerment sits at the center of the game’s argument.

What little ‘text’ can be said to exist in the game is found in small video clips the player earns for solving seemingly optional sets of puzzles. These videos are recordings of known intellectuals speaking about the potential of the self and the process of learning, further solidifying our claims that Blow is interested in how players learn to engage with a game’s rules, even when their initial game knowledge is minimal. For instance, the first clip uncovered is science historian, James Burke’s monologue from *Yesterday, Tomorrow and You*, briefly, “... maybe a good start would be to recognize within yourself the ability to understand anything. Because that ability is there, as long as it is explained clearly enough. And then go and ask for explanations.” Here, Burke’s words speak both to the puzzle and to a philosophy of good living. It is only a small step to then extend the metaphoric puzzles back onto life.

By deciding to make a line-drawing puzzle game, which could ostensibly function as a mobile game, set in a three-dimensional world, we make the case that Blow also hearkens to the tradition of exploratory adventure games like *Metroid* or *The Legend of Zelda* series. The key difference between *The Witness* and such titles, however, is that rather than progress being measured in the number of items collected or the number of dungeons cleared, *The Witness* forces the player to ‘progress’ as a person by becoming familiar with how puzzle mechanics function and by becoming a better puzzle-solver and interpreter of the game space. In his influential essay, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” Henry Jenkins proposes that game designers can tell stories through their environmental layout. He lists several strategies relying of the spatial representation of the game, but emergent and enacted narratives are particularly useful to us here. In laying out space as Blow does, the player is made into a puppet performing the essence of the predefined narrative without demanding any kind of linearity. This journey’s narrative is reliant on the mind of the participant being reshaped and honed in a way that escapes the purview of other representative media. Here the story of self-betterment becomes actualized in the player and the lesson to be learned is not simply told, but embodied. The videogame in this case does not find an alternate medium specific way to represent, as discussed in debates around proceduralism (see Bogost, 2007; Sicart, 2011), but instead presents a narrative in teaching the player to extend the 2D/3D blurring with a blurring of reality itself. We can only leave *The Witness* unfinished or as differently thinking beings.

Keywords

well-played, game studies, *The Witness*, narrative, game design, failure

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