

Forest Tale

(Conceptual draft of a family-orientated computer game)

General Topics

The PC game *Forest Tale* belongs to the so called “point-and-click adventure” game type. Games of the “Monkey Island” or “Kings Quest” series are usually being mentioned as classical examples of this genre, although many and many different companies have presented examples of excellent work in the field. One of the recent and very successful adventure games is “The Longest Journey” (produced by a very small Norwegian company), which got among the top ten in the charts of most PC magazines and has also sold very well so far.

The goal of our game is to find a way through many puzzling situations in a fairy tale type of environment, at the same time helping the main character (a small girl of the age of eight) to find the way home after she has got lost in an enchanted forest. This quest is not simply a more or less mechanical “getting through”, it is connected with a clearly detectable process of personal growth of the main character (the kid from the beginning – a rather spoiled one – turns into a strong-willed, but responsible person at the end). In our opinion this is one of the main specifics of the game, differentiating it clearly from the mass of the “quest” games where pedagogical and moral aspects of the storytelling are often being avoided for the sake of pure playability and fun.

Another important specific of *Forest Tale* is the fact that it is free of open violence. There are no killings in this game and the conflicts between good and bad characters are always solved by means of intelligence and humor. Even the culmination of the game – the final scene in which little Anne finds a way to defeat the bad beaver Heino (who is the incorporation of malevolence here) is being achieved without physical violence.

At the same time we have to immediately mention that, although based on a certain type of didactical convictions and beliefs, the game is neither openly didactic nor does it have the goal of educating children in an overly open way. It is rather an attempt to tell a classical story of adventures and personal growth, hoping to set an example without pointing out too openly at things right and wrong.

Target Group

As main target group we see children above six years (and their parents). Although this is a fairy tale type of story, many aspects of it (for example some of the puzzles and jokes) might be too sophisticated for small children and thus require the active participation of the parents to be deciphered or appreciated. This is clearly intended and that is why we call the game a family-orientated one. Ideally it should become entertainment for the whole family but even if this is not the case we expect that very often at least one grown-up person will be taking part in the play – both as a helper in difficult situations and (for the smaller ones) as one who encourages and supports the child in some of the more gloomy situations.

Technical aspects of the game

Forest Tale is a cartoon game produced by means of traditional hand-painted cell animation techniques. Games like the already mentioned “Monkey Island” series are serving as visual prototypes for it, but of course we believe it possesses a clearly distinguishable own aesthetics. As is the case in most examples of this genre, the players are being introduced into a visually rich and magically transformed environment with its own rules. We did everything to create a game which should win the player through a grasping story, stunning pictures and well-chosen intellectual challenges, rather than through dynamics and the appeal of adrenaline rush. It is a “slow pace” game in which there are many ways to get lost, but no way to die. The struggle and conflicts in it are solved not by means of body contact (fight) but by intelligence, skill and patience.

Technical Specifications (Hardware required to play the game)

Computer:	PC with at least a 120 MHz Pentium Processor
CD drive:	at least 8-fold
Monitor:	800 x 600 Pixel, 16 Bit color
Soundcard:	16 bit (Soundblaster-compatible)
RAM:	32 MB (it might be changed to 64 MB later)
Hard disc space:	depending on the installation, from 16 to 200 MB
Mouse:	MS-compatible mouse

A bit of philosophy

As a result of many discussions with different people we came to the conclusion that to avoid misunderstandings a few purely philosophical aspects of the game and its specifics should be cleared first. The following question appeared again and again: “Where is the difference between your game and a normal cartoon film?”

To be able to answer this question we would like to make an attempt at a (very raw) classification of the computer games available today. Avoiding all complications connected with the different classifications existing we will propose to draw a line between two main types of games:

1. Situation-based games;
2. Story-based (or storytelling) games.

The first type of games (which most strategy games and the so-called “first person shooters” belong to) define an initial situation, leaving most of the subsequent decisions to the players. There is a lot of freedom of choice in those games since there are hardly any pre-defined outcomes in them (they are built on the relatively simple logic of victory or defeat).

The second type of games (which most adventure games – and consequently ours – belong to) tells a detailed story where the main task of the players is to get through the different difficulties and puzzles the design team has put on the way to the complete revelation of the storyline.

There are many similarities between the storytelling games and the traditional storytelling genres – books and movies, for example (which in our opinion explains why the idea that it is difficult to differentiate between these games and traditional cartoons appears again and again). Despite the different attempts made at increasing the purely playing aspects of the games (like alternative story outcomes, increased interactivity, etc.), there is, it seems, a principal level of “sameness” between all those genres, consisting in the fact that the form of the story pre-determines the outcome of the game and thus restricts the freedom of choice of the players. This does not mean that these games cannot be interesting or successful – as we mentioned already, there have been many examples of excellently made games. The classical examples of the genre have sold millions of copies and some of them are still being sold, despite the fact that they have been produced six or eight years ago!

The main difference between adventure games and more traditional storytelling genres, however, lies in the fact that in the games the player takes an active part in “revealing” the storyline, being forced to constantly take decisions and solve problems – which in certain cases might lead to completely different outcomes. There are examples of the genre (“Blade Runner” is a particularly good one) where different decisions in the course of the game lead to absolutely opposing outcomes. In fact there are many different stories put into the body of the game in those cases, and any of them might be played independently of the others, which allows for a higher degree of re-playability.

About marketing

The fact that we produce a storytelling game does have special consequences what marketing approach is concerned. Games of this type are more difficult and expensive to produce than their situation-based brethren and because of this they are a typical case of a niche product. As most realizations concerning basic market realities, this one cannot be defined as a one-sidedly favorable or unfavorable one. A niche product always means a very specific marketing approach but, if the niche is stable and well known, then it also gives many advantages, especially if the publisher has a long experience with the marketing of such products. In our case at least we are convinced that a focused marketing brings only advantages, since the niche for this types of games in Germany is very stable and clearly defined

(many parents in Germany are seriously concerned about violence in the computer games their children play and are ready to pay a bonus for good quality games which are free of violence but entertaining and well done – as the success of the small Berlin-based publishing house “Tivola” proves).

Let us summarize: we are producing a niche product and we believe that this is a great strength of the project, since the market niche we are aiming at is a clearly defined and stable one (middle class German families who are very much interested in giving their children violence-free, but entertaining and didactically committed games). No need to tell all possible attempts will be done to find a German publisher with a good marketing experience in this special respect.

Design of the game

Forest Tale was designed with a main functional goal – to take away all elements which might “get in the way” of the player. In the main “playing space” of the game there are only two functional elements (hidden deeply in the two lower corners of the screen), which in our opinion allows for a play unhindered by technical elements and in certain respects repeats the experience children already have with cartoons, thus allowing for faster orientation in the new environment. All communication with the characters, as well as the interaction with objects on the screen, is done by means of automatically appearing cursors in a few basic forms (look at, talk to, use, go to), which takes into consideration the specifics of the target group (mainly relatively small children) and thus offers a greater easiness of playing. In the dialogs (where decisions have to be taken) there are no textual elements and the different choices are being presented in the form of different icons (symbols), thus making sure that even children who cannot read can nevertheless find their way in the game.

Interface

As already pointed out, the interface of the game is very simple – there are only two functional symbols in it: the one for the inventory the players collect and use during the game (in the form of the small bird-shaped backpack in the lower left corner) and the one for the system of hints (the old clock face in the lower right corner).

The picture below gives an approximate idea about the outlook of a typical screen of the game.



Clicking on one of those symbols starts one of the two main internal program events: opening and using the inventory in the first case, and getting a hint in a particularly difficult situation in the second case.

All purely functional aspects of the play (like changing program presets, saving and loading different game states or leaving the game) are being called with the help of the F1 key, which is also a well-known approach to most computer users.

Music, Sound and Speech

These three aspects of the game design are being managed internally by the program: all scenes have their own background music, accentuating the particular mood of the scene. The music sequences are started automatically when going from one scene to another. The music score might also change if a dialog with a character is started, pointing out his or her features. As for special effects and speech, they are being triggered by user actions (mouse clicks), as common in all computer games.

Dialog Structure

The dialog structure of *Forest Tale* is based on a system we invented especially for this game. We will make here an attempt for brief description of GOSCAB (Graphically Oriented System of Choosing an Appropriate Behavior).

1. Interaction between players and game characters

The main specific of GOSCAB is that the interaction between players and game characters is non-linear. Unlike the dialog systems in most computer games which have a purely informative or entertaining function (or both, in an ideal case), here the system sets certain tasks to the players: they can only successfully continue the play if they get through the dialog, meaning that they have to “find the key” to the concrete character. The idea is to teach children to find an appropriate behavior in life-like situations where they meet good and bad characters. The logic is very simple – they have to behave “appropriately”, meaning to pay anybody his due, being good with the good ones and strict (but not nasty) with the bad ones. At certain places in the dialogs there are “key points” in which the players can choose between two types of behavior, symbolically presented by a “good” (smiling face) and a “bad” icon (scornful face). Only one of the two types allows them to go forward through the dialog, meaning that they have to try again if they chose the “wrong” one. Principally seen, this is nothing but a simplified form of a multiple choice test system and we are aware of the fact that its usage might be taken as an unnecessary hindrance by some players. To avoid the “teasing effect” of the system we have added the following “safety valves”:

1. By using the escape key one can leave the dialog at any time and start doing something different, more interesting. This does not mean that one can go further without finishing the dialog according to the preset “right” pattern, but it allows for a break if the task is being perceived as particularly teasing at the moment.
2. We did everything to make the dialogs short and clear, without too many “quirks” and unnecessary literary “make-up”. We trust the language of the game is nevertheless a beautiful one.
3. By some of the dialogs it is allowed to go further without finishing them (if their content is not decisive for the development of the story). Besides, not all dialogs have the GOSCAB features built in. Some of them are just going through in a more or less automatic way, interrupted by occasional stops to make room for a “breath”. In this way we make sure the players are not forced to replay long sequences they already know (by the replay of a scene, for example).

2. Actual Dialog Structure

The GOSCAB dialogs are built on a hypertextual basis (a “basic” flow of the dialog, leading to a successful ending, accompanied by dead-end branches). The following example should show this in a concrete way.

Anne talks to her backpack (which is very much hurt by the bad way it has been treated by the girl back when both were home). The girl tries to convince it to accompany her in the search of a way out

of the forest but it does not want to, so she must convince it. And here, it turns out, not all types of behavior lead to success. Anne has to find a really convincing way to win the trust of the backpack – which means, the players have to meet the right decisions when branching through the dialog.

The backpack: I do not give a damn! Nobody will try to eat ME here. And, to be honest, after all you have done to me I am really curious to see how the ghosts will treat you. It must be an interesting sight, I guess.

Key point, two possible answers.

Branching (variant 1 allows for further progress in the dialog, variant 2 leads to a dead end).

1. (friendly behavior)

Anne: Listen, at that time I could not know you were alive and had feelings.

(further conversation follows in which the girl finally succeeds in winning the trust of the backpack)

2. (rough behavior)

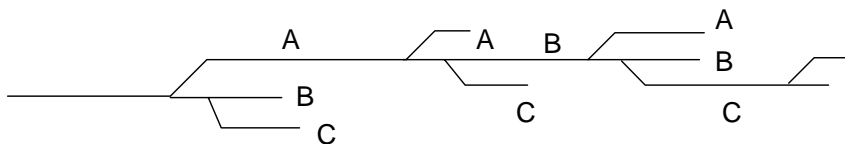
Anne: I cannot believe you are so stupid! Do you really think you can get out of this gloomy forest all on your own?

(this reaction leads to a dead end where the backpack refuses to talk to Anne for the time being. The players have to start a new attempt and choose the other “behavioral choice” to be able to continue with the game)

It must be clear already that the system is not complicated at all, requiring only a bit of common reasoning and fairness to come through. In any event it is not possible to find the “right” answer by simple mechanical clicking on one of the icons – because the different characters are of course behaving differently and thus require **concrete** answers. Good girls do not go to heaven here ☺.

If the players succeed in avoiding all dead ends in the dialog, they come to its end where usually a key event is triggered (they either get some object from that character or get a piece of information which is very important for the further development of the game).

What follows is a graphical presentation of the branching structure (in this case with more than one dead end for the sake of clarity):



Between the key points there goes a more or less automatic dialog sequence in which both the game character and Anne (that is, the players) are saying pre-defined phrases. By the next branching a new decision has to be taken – and so on till the successful end of the dialog. There are not more than four branches per dialog, however.

Finally, we have to point out that if the GOS CAB system turns out to be too much of a hindrance it will not be applied in the final version of the game. If there are too many complaints after the demo version is being tested, we will omit it.

Story

Introduction – animation

The game starts in the room of Anne – a small girl of about eight who lives together with her mother. A few clues in the scene – both visual and verbal – give us to understand that Anne is kind of a difficult child, stubborn and self-centered. A lot of broken toys cover the room, her mother hardly manages to control her and prefers to avoid the conflicts the girl regularly creates.



There is a visitor ringing at the door: an old gentleman dressed in funny looking old-fashioned clothes comes to the house. In the following conversation it becomes clear that **Mr. Neerod Lahptsew** has a very unusual job – he works as **preserver of endangered toys**. He does not explain what this exactly means – and nobody comes to asking further questions since both mother and daughter get completely bound by the view of the game he shows them. It is a model landscape built in extreme detail, and its most fascinating feature is that it looks **alive**. In any event one can clearly see that its inhabitants and parts – different animals, trees, the river in its middle – are moving. Completely enchanted, little Anne insists on getting the game at any price. Of course it turns out it is not for sale, but the old man agrees to lend it to her for a few days. His behavior is somehow strange. Has he had a clear idea about the outcome of the meeting still at its very beginning? And why does he wish little Anne **strength** when he goes away? Those questions must remain without answers till the end of the game.

Anne plays day and night with the new game – until a few days later a disaster happens: its parts suddenly stop moving, all efforts of desperate Anne to repair it come to nothing. Blinded by anger the small girl takes a heavy hammer and gives the “nasty thing” a heavy blast.

Well, that definitely has been a wrong idea: suddenly the game starts to glow with a blue light and out of its middle a small tornado appears. Anne cannot make a single movement, the tornado slowly touches her and ... in front of our eyes the girl is being sucked into the magic world of the game.



Chapter one: Lost

Screaming on top of her lungs, the small girl falls down into the middle of a small meadow in the forest. Her old backpack falls down shortly afterwards.

Before she has managed to really come to her senses Anne already meets the first inhabitant of the forest. An old clock named Quirky and his constant companion Boo (a strange creature looking like a bat whose wings are made out of the ... severed ears of some unlucky toy) start joking with her and explain that she has come to “the most scary one of all enchanted forests existing – the famous Ghost Forest”. They warn her to avoid the ghosts at any price and watch out all of the time – because “those guys do not possess even the slightest sense of humor”. Frightened, but still stubborn enough, Anne asks them for help but her unfriendly manner only annoys the two fellows. Still she is lucky: after a short hesitation old Quirky agrees to come and help her if she really gets in trouble. From this moment on his face serves as a hint-icon (in the lower right corner of the screen).



Next thing Anne discovers her old backpack and succeeds in winning its friendship back (initially it is very angry at her because she has always treated it badly). From this moment on the backpack also becomes a part of the game interface (it is the icon for managing the inventory the players collect during the game).



Anne soon discovers that getting away from the meadow and into the forest is not an easy task: two of the three ways out are blocked by different obstacles. To the left there is a huge pile of very smooth stones and to the right there is a big spider net (and a mean looking spider-watch, collecting a fare from those who would like to go through). Anne finds out that the beaver Heino – the “big shot” of the Enchanted Forest – has built such “toll-collecting points” everywhere in the forest and nobody is allowed to get through without paying. She does not have any money and therefore is not allowed to pass.

A new character appears. This is Mr. Rabbit – an old hippie, the “big hat, no cows” type. The conversation with him reveals new details about the Enchanted Forest and its inhabitants. It seems that Anne should be looking for answers and help at Madame Owl’s – the old fortune teller who lives on the other side of the big swamp and the poppy field. Both places are to be avoided, however: there are many dangers there and, unfortunately, Mr. Rabbit cannot even tell how to find the way to them. A recent storm has turned everything upside down, so now everybody must find the way on his own.

After a lot of difficulties Anne succeeds in getting away from the meadow. In a watermill near the river she meets Grandpa Hedgehog – a lovely old character who would love to help her but now is too busy with his own problems: for some reason the wheel of the watermill has stopped turning for a few days and now his garden is slowly dying since he cannot water it. Besides, he is too tired now, he must get some rest and cannot talk for long.

Left without help, curious Anne decides to find out the cause of the problem on her own. She climbs on top of the wheel and after having a look at the other side she immediately discovers the reason for the malfunction: a family of fat beavers has built their nest in the base of the wheel, thus blocking it completely. It turns out Anne has the honor of meeting Mr. Heino in person.

The conversation with him reveals he is a cold and arrogant type who lives under the motto “the world is there to be owned – and preferably by me”. All attempts of Anne to convince him he has built his home on somebody else’s property, that old Grandpa Hedgehog may lose his garden because of him do not help at all. Heino insists he is right and refuses to try anything to free the wheel.





Furious, Anne leaves the place and soon finds a way to outsmart Heino – taking advantage of the fact that he cannot afford any public scandals anymore (his wife has been too foolish and has told Heino has just gotten through a “big publicity nightmare, a real nasty affair”). Anne manages to scare him enough until he finally leaves the place. He swears revenge and goes away, letting the wheel free again.

Grandpa Hedgehog is moved to tears. As a sign of his thankfulness he gives Anne a few pieces of gold and also his family treasure: two small mushroom pieces. Unfortunately he cannot explain what their secret is: it has gotten lost with the many and many years the treasure has been given from father to son.

Anne soon finds the way to the swamp – but a new difficulty awaits her there: once more Heino has built a “toll-collecting point” and despite the fact she has got money now, Anne does not succeed in getting through: the machinery is a pure swindle and it only swallows the coins you put into it.

After a lot of difficulties the smart girl manages to get through both the swamp and the poppy field. Arriving at Madame Owl’s, she hopes she will finally learn how to get back home. Or maybe not?

No, she is bitterly disappointed. The old fortune-teller can only give her three very vague hints:

1. The way out must be searched under the ground.
2. Anne must win the friendship of the “little folk”.
3. Anne must learn to fly.



Of course the girl is not very happy about this and insists on getting her fortune told one more time. Unwillingly, the old bird does it and ... this time is getting pale with fear: the crystal sphere shows Anne can find answers to all her questions only at the Ghost Mansion – the place where the ghosts live. And this means sure death, there is no doubt about it.

Anne is both frightened and relieved: at least she has a clear goal now, and anything seems better to her in comparison with the uncertainty she has gotten through.

While being at Madame Owl's place Anne makes a very important discovery: the mushroom pieces do exactly the same thing they did to Alice in Wonderland – one of them makes you grow taller, and the other makes you grow shorter. The girl immediately tests their functioning and, although they work properly, she still does not manage to come near the solution of her problem. There does not seem to be anything which can help her come to the other side of the river – because that is where it is, the mysterious Ghost Mansion.

Chapter two – In the Anthill

Near the shore Anne discovers a big anthill. To her most unpleasant surprise, the moment she has used here the “shortening” mushroom piece she gets arrested by the ants-warriors. It turns out that in the anthill there rules a dictatorial regime: a small group of technologically very advanced red ants-warriors keeps the great mass of black ants-workers under a strict rule, using them as cheap labor force. And, what is worse, many of the black ants, who have never seen the daylight and have worked all their lives deep under the ground, do not have even the slightest idea of their real situation. All attempts of little Anne to convince them there is a better world outside – one where it is light and warm – come to nothing. All they are interested in is watching TV, and the only answer Anne gets is “if there would have been such a world, we would have seen it on TV already”.

Well, almost all of them ... One of the ants-workers – Big Sid – does start to believe Anne after she manages to show him the outside of the hill through a small hole. Together they start digging a tunnel which should lead them to freedom.

What a bad luck! The tunnel, it turns out, leads directly to the room where the guards are resting. Big Sid gets arrested and thrown in jail – but it takes the efforts of all guards to bring him down to the prison cells.

Lucky Anne has remained unnoticed, and after she finds a guardian-suit in the room she is not to be told from the rest of the guards. Now she can walk everywhere without being arrested.

Many and many adventures later she manages to help Sid escape from prison, and together they even get into the command center – the place where the TV programs for the “prols” are being broadcast. They get control of it and succeed in broadcasting a TV program showing the outer world.

Revolution! The black workers suddenly realize they have been manipulated and stand up for their rights. Soon the anthill is free and Anne is being celebrated as “liberator” of the ants.

Most important, it turns out that the tunnels of the ants lead all the way below the riverbed to the other shore. Anne has finally managed to get to the side of the river where the Ghost Mansion is.

But it is still a long way there. She has hardly managed to grow herself back to her normal height when a giant bird grabs her and takes her away. She has just become pray for one of the most frightening hunters in the Enchanted Forest: the great Eagle.

Chapter three – In the Eagle's Nest

Poor Anne is so frightened, she drops the mushroom pieces while being carried away by the eagle. Now she can only wait and see what will happen later.

The eagle brings her into his nest (a complicated construction consisting of many interconnected rooms in one of the walls of the canyon up there in the mountains) where she will serve as breakfast to his children. The two eagle chicks are very busy with the dismembering of a toy so the girl is just being stuffed into a cage on the big table in their workshop. Listening to their conversation Anne realizes that they are big fans of all possible kinds of brain teasers and puzzles. Fortunately the girl has got a big book with puzzles at Madame Owl's so she starts asking the chicks different difficult questions now. It turns out they are cheating: instead of trying to solve the puzzles themselves they are using their computer. This, however, does only work as long as Anne is asking them logical questions concerning scientific knowledge and things like that. But when the girl comes to the idea of asking them

stupidly-absurd questions like “What is large and gray and goes around and around in circles?” (Answer: An elephant stuck in a revolving door) they start to lose their confidence: this is the first time somebody outsmarts them in their favorite game. Soon Anne manages to get them absolutely mad and they give up. Impressed, they offer her a deal: if she manages to decipher the lock of her cage they will not only save her life but will also keep her as a favorite toy. Of course she solves the puzzle easily and thus is let out of the cage, being even allowed to move freely inside the nest.



The series of tasks and puzzles Anne has to solve until she gets free is far too complicated to be discussed here in detail. Let us only say that she manages to get rid of the chicks (who go for their first flying lesson together with their father) and then assembles a hang glider out of parts she finds in the nest, after which the escape is not that difficult.

But the difficulties are far from over. After successfully managing to avoid all traps of the wild mountain river in the canyon she finally comes back to the forest (on the back of the fish-king!) and descends again on the far shore where the Ghost Mansion is.

Chapter four – The Ghost Mansion

Well, getting into that mansion is not easy at all. Again Anne has to solve a lot of problems and to avoid many traps until she gets inside. But there she meets the wrath of the ghosts! They nearly kill her and only the command of a mysterious voice saves her from the worst. Anne is being thrown out and must again find a way to get in. After a few more adventures she finally manages to disguise so thoroughly that the ghosts do not recognize her. And here comes a very, very bad surprise for her: after a long conversation with them she manages to finally find out their secret.

Of course we are not going to reveal the secret here. We will only say that it thoroughly shocks little Anne. But not only this – as it turns out, she is the only person who can help the ghosts (because – you supposed it, didn't you – they are something quite different than what she has expected). In order to do this, she must come through three extremely difficult tests ...

We will not reveal here what the three tests are. After many and many difficulties the girl manages to solve all puzzles and get through all difficulties until the (unavoidable) happy end comes.

Epilogue

Anne is home again. Old Mr. Lahptsew has just come to get the borrowed game back. The mother cannot help telling him again and again about the deep impact it must have had on her daughter – there is no trace of the spoiled kid from the beginning, Anne is almost a grown-up person now. Smiling at each other, Anne and the wizard do not say much. At the end he takes a small toy out of his pocket and gives it to the girl. It is a snow dome in which the Enchanted Forest can be seen. After he has left, Anne looks into the dome and discovers all of her new friends and foes looking and pointing at her (Heino swears revenge again). Is the story really over? You rather do not bet!

We would say, everything is a matter of appropriate financing ☺.