

## **Loops essay**

For creating our demo of Babushka, we got involved in a design process where developing the core loops of our game was both the focus and the inspiration to think which player experience we wanted to create in particular.

### **Prototyping**

The first intended player experience we liked for our game was the exploration of a hostile environment, where the player can empathize with the character difficulties and, at the same time, enjoy the beauty of a wild place with unique landscapes and quietness. On the basis of this idea, we introduced exploration and finding resources as main mechanics of our core loop. But we wanted the game to be challenging for the player, so we decided that, in order to progress, the player should use the items in a proper way, solving a puzzle. These puzzles would reflect mainly the danger and secrets hidden in the Russian taiga forest.

Once the core loop (in green in the diagram, see Fig. 1) and the theme were settled, we could build levels around them. We started working on basic assets and controls to create a playable prototype and get to know the player experience that it affords. The jump mechanic wasn't implemented at that time yet, as it wasn't required.

In this prototype we would show our endearing Babushka in the middle of the forest with a few assets to explore, that were sketched during our meetings to make sure that everyone was on the same page. To playtest the puzzle for the prototype within the team, the designers chose a material different from the digital creation we wanted to implement. The paper prototype allowed us to move assets to different places with our hands and play around with them to create challenges quickly in an effective and tangible form.

Going back to the digital prototype, we wanted to increase players' curiosity and make them wonder what can they do and use, so we thought a point-and-click adventure would suit this idea. The player had to click to move and explore the surroundings in a single image scene. The two halves of land were split by a harsh stream, preventing Babushka from crossing from the left side to the right. Trees and bushes were placed on both sides of the stream. The player had to be able to move Babushka close to every bush to discover which one of them holds a prompt to solve the puzzle. Clicking on the correct bush, an axe appeared. The player could click on it and try to use it on different trees. There was a particular tree placed next to the stream. When falling on the correct way, it acted as a bridge, allowing Babushka to cross the stream safely. She could bring the axe with her for following challenges.

We introduced the death of the character as a way to prevent the player to get stuck if the tree falls to the incorrect side, but we didn't want to create frustration (in the future) forcing the player to repeat the game every time

Babushka dies, so we agreed on respawning the character in a fair position to solve the corresponding puzzle.

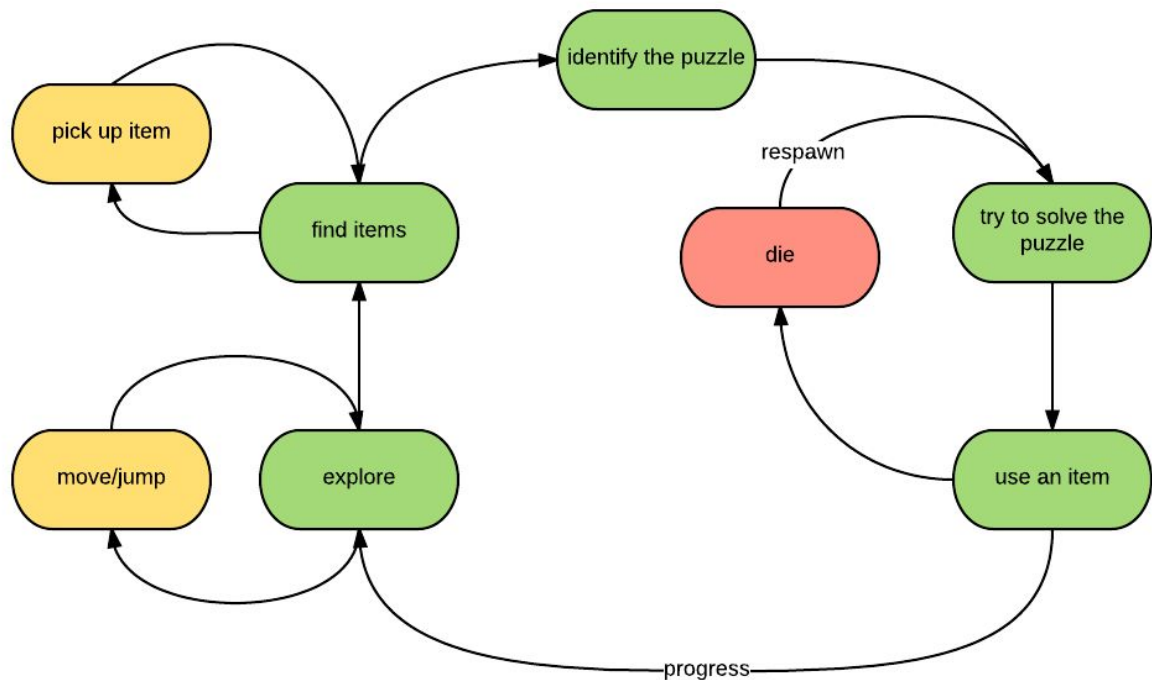


Fig. 1: Core loop of the game Babushka

After presenting the prototype, we got strong feedback on three issues:

- Usability: the point-and-click was feeling really bad to move around. For this reason we decided to let players move with the keyboard creating their own path from one point to another.
- The freedom we were giving to the player movement in a 2.5D game. For rendering sprites we had to use an orthographic camera, discarding perspective. Even when using an algorithm to simulate perspective when the character was going further in the 3D space, it was looking very unrealistic, and, anyways, the player had nothing to interact with among the background elements, whose purpose was mainly artistic. In addition, we wanted to make clear that the purpose of the game was moving forward and completing the story, leading the character to the end, so we decided to reduce the width of the depth movement as if the player was in a path.

- The importance of staring around in a mood-game without the necessity of action happening continuously. This made us think about beautiful transitions between seasons and different vegetation, and adding music and sound effects to immerse players in that lonely trip on the nature.

These decisions had a significant effect in our loop, playing down exploration. If at some point we considered having an inventory to store collected items, we definitely discarded the idea, thinking that Babushka could just carry them with her. We also reconsidered the dead/respawn in our game and decided that we should try to give the player feedback when the character dies. For this, we introduced text-boxes that provide clues on what did they do wrong.

## Creating the demo

With an eye on the future game, challenges had to go hand in hand with learnability within the game, to make the game experience pleasurable,. We considered a learning curve that progress along with the puzzles, so first challenges are easier and facilitate learning and use of isolated mechanics. As the player progresses in the game, puzzles require previous knowledge and combinations of the mechanics to be solved. We also considered the idea of introducing little puzzles in between that would be easier according to the progression, to allow the player to interact with the game and get positive feedback without struggling. This way, we shape our target game, that we wanted to last 30-40 minutes. As the time was limited, we had to aim to complete a representative demo of the game. To facilitate the creation of individual parts of the game, we segmented it as the following diagram shows:

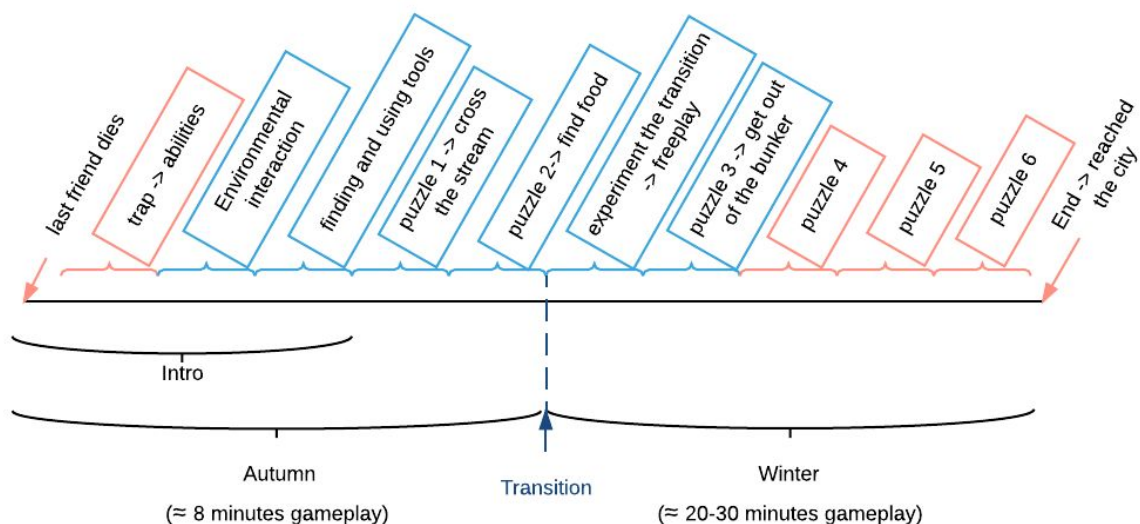


Fig 2. Diagram of the game levels.

For the demo, we decided to focus in the game loop and how the player progresses in the game instead of the narrative part, that introduces the tragic story of Babushka in the beginning and leads to a probably not less dramatic ending. So we discarded the first and last points (arrows in the diagram) and the first sequence that was supposed to teach the player basic controls. We substituted it for a splash screen (Fig 3.). This way, our demo allowed an initial interaction with the environment and the use of the elements that can be found and present three puzzles. In the last one, the bunker level, the player has to use the chopping mechanic learnt in the first puzzle and a branch to reach the exit, as it does in the second level to reach an apple.

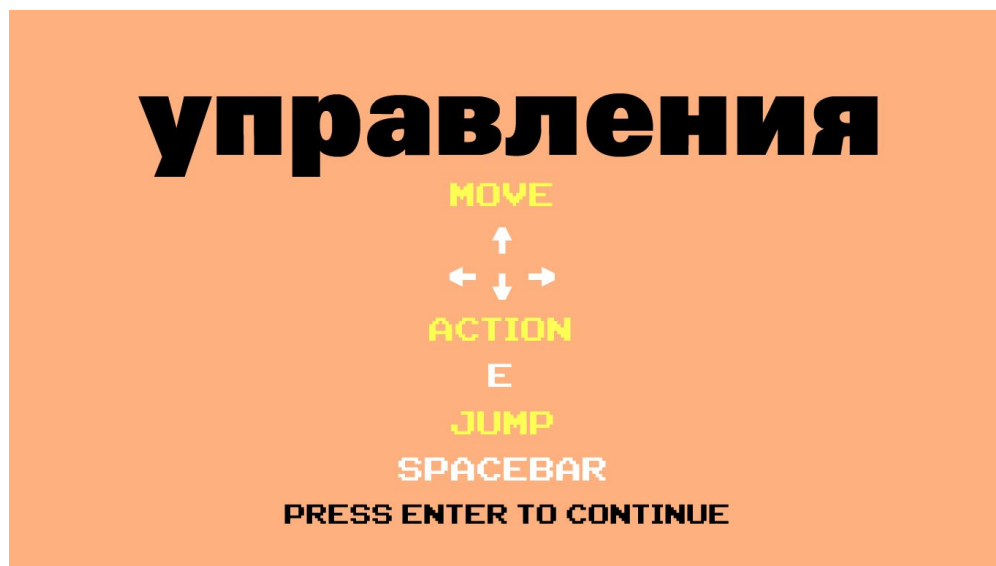


Fig 3. Splash screen

To illustrate the significance of the environment and represent how tough the journey is for Babushka, we included the transition between Autumn and Winter before the third puzzle. The player moves forward through a snowstorm while everything around become white and the wind blows stronger.

After playtesting the final product, we can say we managed to develop a game with our primary focus set on its core loops. This approach is also very useful to look back and reflect on which aspects are failing. For example, we can easily identify how our first loop placed importance in exploration, which goes on the line of the slow-paced mood game we had in mind. For the demo, not only the exploration was reduced, but we also placed more weight on skills introducing the jump mechanic and action puzzles, taking a different direction. Reflecting on the loop of our game would help us to figure out which elements of our demo we should save and which ones should be discarded to make a balanced game, playful but also consistent with the story and the experience we want to transmit.