THE FOREST

Shawn Urban

Hylophobia - The Fear of Forests

You're on a plane, sitting next to your son. He sleeps peacefully, leaning his head on your arm.

Over the intercom, a flight attendant says:

"Ladies and Gentleman, we are now crossing a zone of turbulence.

Please return to your seats, and keep your seatbelts fastened."

Then, you are jerked forward as the plane appears to start descending.

The flight attendant nervously speaks into the intercom,

over the sounds of glass shattering and moans of metal bending.

Being tossed around in your seat, you see grass and trees outside the plane window.

. . .

You wake up between the row of seats,

your arms are covered in blood.

You see your son, laying on the ground in front of you

You pull yourself towards him.

. . .

But, there's a man standing over him.

You crawl.

crawl.

The man picks up your son,

and walks out into the night.

. . .

You wake up in The Forest.

The Forest is an open-world survival horror game which, through gameplay, expresses that what you don't know will scare you. The game encourages you to explore in order to gain insight about the story and game environment. If you don't explore, you *will* die; you'll die of hunger or thirst, and you must explore to satisfy these needs. As you explore, find clues, and slowly begin to realize the true backstory to all of the events of *The Forest*, you become more curious, and even more unnerved.

The goal of the game is to find your son, Timmy, by adventuring around a forest with a large span of underground cave systems. In many places, you can find pictures, manuscripts, drawings from your son, and video tapes that give information about what truly happened in this area, before, during, and after the plane crash.

The forest and caves are inhabited by manic cannibal creatures. There are different types of cannibals that the player encounters as they play the game. The player is not informed of their presence in the game. This emphasizes the idea that what the player doesn't know

may hurt them. The player may be chopping down trees or setting up a shelter and hear a wild scream in the distance, see something running away out of the corner of their eye, or see a strange figure watching them from afar. The initial reaction from the player is a genuine feeling of horror and fear. When they realize that some other beings are in the forest with them, they begin to question if there are other things they don't yet know about *The Forest*, instilling more fear into the player.
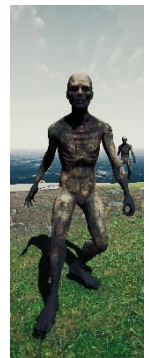
This tactic of making the player scared is very effective. The player may, only once, see something watching them, and for the rest of the time that they play the game, they will be scared that something is still around. They will always be watching their backs out of fear of something coming after them.

The need to explore soon becomes a fear for the player. They know they *need* to find food, water, build a shelter, and find Timmy. But, the player begins to question what they want to do next. The

player starts to think in terms of worst-case scenarios. They may want to go out and find more clues, but they begin to think about the things that could happen to them. What if they get ambushed by a cannibal army? What if they run out of food, and need to resort to eating dead cannibals? Eventually, the player's imagination starts to run rampant. The player *knows* that there are a lot of things they *don't* know. They never know what to expect.

Soon, the player begins to fear about what exactly happened to Timmy. At any point, will they find Timmy's half-eaten corpse? Who took him and why? Will all of this have been for nothing? Questions like these constantly run through the player's head as they explore the world. After getting their bearings in the forest, the player starts to find many entrances to underground caves. These caves are where most of the story's clues can be found.

A Latin manuscript found in the caves

The cave exploration is the scariest part about *The Forest.* The fear of not knowing what is beyond the darkness, waiting and watching, is horrifying. A lighter is the most basic way to provide a small amount of light, but it is not always trustworthy. It is often still hard to see with just the lighter, and sometimes the flame goes out. When this happens, the player waits in the darkness and listens as the character quickly tries to flick the lighter back on. The player fears what they will see when the flame is reignited, is a cannibal standing right in front of them?

The caves are full of cannibals, which is seemingly where they spend most of their time. Many horrors can be found in the caves: such as detached fingers hanging from strings and gutted corpses of fellow plane passengers hanging from the ceilings. The player never knows what they will find next.

The player often experiences fear through the things they hear in the caves. Through the impenetrable darkness, screaming cannibals can be heard running around. If they see the player, they sometimes run directly at the player to attack them. The player often cannot see the cannibals until they are very close to them, and at this point it is too late to hide.

Giant mutant cannibals are found deeper in the caves. Their size, speed, and looks are very intimidating and horrifying. They are mostly found in large open parts of caves, with a small army of normal sized cannibals. Guttural roars and harsh screams can be heard when near them. Often times, the large mass of these mutants can be seen in the flickering light as the player climbs down a rope, deeper into the caves. The darkness of the caves ensures that the player has no idea what they may be up against at any moment.
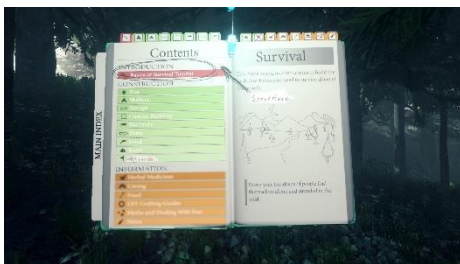
The player is eventually pointed towards a giant sinkhole in the middle of the map. There is no way to get to the bottom of the sinkhole from the surface level. By exploring the caves, the player may sometimes reach points where the cave opens up in the side of the sinkhole. The player needs to keep exploring downwards in the cave systems to get to the bottom of the sinkhole. The player doesn't know why the sinkhole is there, or what is at the bottom. This is the last place the player needs to explore, and all they know is that they might find Timmy at the bottom.

A basic survival guide is given to the player at the beginning. It teaches the player how to build shelters, make items, and gives general rules of survival. The guide gives the player a false sense of security and understanding of the game. The player might just be getting comfortable building their new shelter they learned how to make, just to have it raided by a recon group of cannibals. Over time, the player may notice more cannibals running by, looking at them, and running away. This can make the player feel uneasy and worried. Eventually, the player may be attacked by an army of cannibals, with stronger cannibal leaders and large mutants. The player may be killed or forced to move the location of their shelter in order to avoid more attacks from cannibals. The player must always be on their toes, the cannibals could always be watching and preparing to attack.

The irrational fear of the unknown originates from new or foreign things or experiences. In the case of *The Forest,* the fear of the unknown comes from the things we have yet to experience or perceive. Simply the thoughts running through the player's head when playing the game is enough to create a fear of what they do not yet know. Even after beating the game, and learning all that there is left to know about the story of *The Forest,* the game is still scary. The audio design, horrifying cannibals, dark underground caves, and unsettling story events still keep the game fresh and spooky for returning players. But, until the player finishes the game, they can only *imagine* the true horrors hidden behind *The Forest.*

References

https://theforest.gamepedia.com/Mutant
https://theforest.gamepedia.com/Cannibal_and_Mutant
https://theforest.gamepedia.com/Sinkhole
https://images.eurogamer.net/2014/usgamer/TheForestSpot2.jpg
http://4images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/4/theforest-survivalbook_2510244.jpg
https://theforest.gamepedia.com/Latin_Paper
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fear#Common_phobias