

The Trees' Macbeth

Sertoma Arts Center

Text Generated by Alex Rubinsteyn and Sergey Feldman

Script Composed by Annie Blazejack and Geddes Levenson

Audio Recorded and Edited by Paul Voran and Elijah Webb

Music Written and Performed by Xylem

What is happening here?

You are listening to a computer-generated adaptation of the Macbeth play performed by trees.

The script was composed in collaboration with a machine learning algorithm. Computer scientists Sergey Feldman and Alex Rubinsteyn 'fed' the Macbeth script and books about Everglades ecosystems into their learning machine. It then generated hundreds of paragraph-long blocks of text. Artists Annie Blazejack and Geddes Levenson finessed the computer's output, cutting it up and rearranging it into a nine-character play with a loose plot.

In the play, Lady Macbeth leads a tree-killing army into the forest. The three Weird Sisters (witches) and three talking trees conspire to stop her. Under their influence, she experiences a strangely-worded epiphany, and then decides she must become a tree in the forest herself.

A computer-generated script combines words and thoughts in ways that are unfamiliar and surprising. These trees don't just speak like people - their speech is uncanny, only adjacent to our understanding.

What does it mean for a tree to be an actor rather than mere scenery? How do we give agency and voice to different kinds of sentience? How does listening to these new voices help us empathize with the non-human?

Script

Characters

Lady Macbeth: Lindsay Arber

Banquo: Sergey Feldman

Messenger: Rob Simmons

Witch 1: Lisa Veronica Wood

Witch 2: Tamar Libicki

Witch 3: Chris Martens

Tree 1: Tom Blazejack

Tree 2: Suzanne Levinson

Tree 3: Annie Blazejack

Scene 1: Witches chat**Witch 1:**

The grasses of the Everglades are,
and have always been,
moving and speaking beings.

Witch 2:

There is a certain fragility to the wilderness of the moment

Witch 3:

The water level in the cypress domes is high.

Witch 2:

The Mangrove trees are so thickly packed
that they form a cathedral of sorts

Witch 1:

Sanctum sanctorum

Witch 3:

An altar, for my Sisters' eyes to gaze upon.

Witch 2:

Before Lady Macbeth arrived,
the upper Glade was so much muck and swamp

Witch 1:

It was inconceivable that a people could have flourished here

Witch 3:

The depth of swamp and the diversity of life
make this an expensive drain.

Witch 1:

Wouldn't it be great fun to swing the pendulum,
to swing the world,
back and forth between water and land

Witch 3:

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

Witch 2:

Lady Macbeth!

Scene 2: A Messenger tells Lady Macbeth about the success of her tree killing project**Lady Macbeth:**

The world is a broken record.
Every moment, every inch of the world, is a trick.
The tree-like creatures are so numerous,
so richly green, you would think there were more seasons than there are in the world!
Now is a time for killing grass, for leveling sedges, flattening dales.
It is a time for cutting ribbons in the grass and feeding them to worms.
For spreading-mesh fences; it is a time for budding, budding fences.

Messenger:

Hail Macbeth!

Lady Macbeth:

Hail, brave friend!
By your looks you have been digging the canal.
What news of the dredging?
Share your knowledge of the broil
As thou didst leave it.

Messenger:

I was standing on a high berm overlooking the creek,
ten feet above the seabed.
The air above me smelled vaguely of coming rain and lichen.

Lady Macbeth:

What of the trees? Could we breach their snarled roots?

Messenger:

Doubtful it stood;
 The mangrove hammock was only a foot from the edge of the berm
 So thick were the boughs that my hand could not penetrate them

New trees began to creep upward, split, and multiply.
 Their trunks were as new as the day I was created.
 And they groaned with every beat of my heart.

As trees advanced,
 The mud beneath my feet split, spread, and rippled.
 Their roots engulfed us.

Lady Macbeth:

Awe, awe, disgust!
 You have marvell'd me.
 But you must go on.

Messenger:

The loam was so fresh it buffeted the lungs
 and we could see our lives flash before our eyes.
 A few minutes passed, and we made good progress.
 Then, abruptly, something nudged against my boot, flopped over.
 We did push the canal
 Through to the sea, and salt water gushed.
 Their soils were so full of liquid
 that it were impractical for any plant to take
 up residence, and remain standing.
 A new sound filled the clearing,
 a high, rasping sound like distant thunder but more urgent.
 The forest was falling.

Lady Macbeth:

The sound of their fall is the sound of our triumph over death. The sound of our victory is the groaning of trees.

Messenger: *(Slowly, in a daze)*

I have done no harm.
 And yet I feel as if I had done harm.

I was a tree in the forest, and my job was to fall.
 The forest had to fall, one by one.
 The wood, empty. Sleep snuffed. Gone.

Lady Macbeth (*to the audience*)

He is faint. So should he look
 That seems to speak things strange.

**Scene 3: A conversation among Trees, and then
 A confrontation between Banquo and the Trees, and then
 The Witches arrive and make a deal with the Trees, and then,
 The Witches transform Banquo into a supernatural animal-human hybrid, and then,
 An uneasy alliance between Witches and Trees**

Tree 1:

Pale of the world, come to life;
 Strange dreams, troubling dreams,
 And shames yet beautiful morning-comings.
 Come into the world, come into the world.

Within the volume of time I have seen
 Hours dreadful and things strange, but this sore night
 Hath trifled former knowings.

The same neighborhoods where a bear lurks,
 The same neighborhoods where panthers still prowl,
 and where hundreds of bird species are endangered or near-extinct:
 I have seen the lawns of estates like Rose and Ditchfield

Swarming humans:
 Each new morn
 A new batch comes.

Tree 2:

Where do they come from?

Tree 3:

Their region is as a forest without a tree.

Tree 2:

They are free bags full of the most elaborate water-control projects.

Tree 3:

Aye, and how they do march us to the mulcher.

Tree 2:

'Tis said they eat each other.

Enter Banquo**Banquo:**

What are these
So withered and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants of the earth,
And yet are on it? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me,

Tree 2:

Is it a man?

Tree 1:

It has a long, thin body like a slug.

Banquo:

I am Banquo.

Tree 3:

His shiny, sugary eye looks like a gleam of candy.

Banquo:

My business is Lady Macbeth's
My purpose is to discuss the propriety, or otherwise, of our
acquisition of the land.

Tree 3:

Young fry of treachery!

Tree 2:

Make all our trumpets speak; give them all breath,
Those clamorous harbingers of blood and death.

Tree 1:

We will have blood

Tree 2:

They say, blood will have blood

Tree 3:

All birds, including the great kite,
Will stone thee to death. Out, out,
Thou hideous worm!

Banquo:

Difficult woods and thickets!
Though your bark cannot be lost,
Yet it would be tempest-tost.

It is moving, inexorably, down a landscape where the meanest blade of grass can turn to dust.
The question is not whether we should acquire it, but how to acquire it.

Let the destruction of the Everglades continue. Let the killing of the Everglades continue.
I will get thee dug, and I will put thee to sea.

Tree 1:

Thou art the best o' the cut-throats.

Tree 2:

That title is for Macbeth.

Tree 3:

The canal digger!
There is no end to her.

Tree 1:

Who would bear a grain of such seed
As this mankind
And sow it where none hath yet

Sow'd a man's seed?

Banquo:

Still, the land is ours.

It is also a vast, uninhabited slough, a dead-end street, a wasteland.

We will make it firm land for firm houses.

Tree 2:

I find my tears fall easy down my cheeks;

They have no water in them.

The canals that flood also drain.

Enter Witches

Witch 1:

We are twig budged with sympathy

Witch 2:

Yes, do ask us to help

Witch 3:

We could break the line of the battle.

Tree 1:

Who is this that appears before me?

Tree 3:

Strangers.

Tree 2:

More men?

Witch 1:

Stranger yet.

Witch 2:

There is nothing in space

That does not descend to the earth

Witch 3:

I'll show you a thing you never thought you'd see.
 A light in time! A light in time!
 Where you keep the stars

Witch 2:

The spaces where stars were wont to live.

Witch 3:

We keep the mystery of stars and the mystery of time.

Tree 3:

Art not these three sisters?

Witch 3

Ay, we are three of my self,
 The three Strange Sisters.

Tree 2:

Let's not consort with them

Witch 2:

We'll make of this Banquo a fresh beast,
 His face lion mettled proud, but with revisions of lizards

Witch 1:

To the busy craft of magic we'll make up
(chanting)
 beginning, middle, and end,
 descend, and stand again.
 Hungry eye, let it in. Let it in.
 Look like the innocent lamb,
 But be the wolf of the other
 World.

Tree 3:

Confound all spiritual things
 That labour and desire power;
 Strange sisters, craft your magic.

Magical witchy sound

Tree 3:

Though he drink and give in the poison of luxury,
 Though he wear greedy gout of sweat,
 Though he swoon with his fancy's thrill,
 Yet we'll find him balked in his estate.

Tree 2:

Detritus from a kind of molting:
 a long trail of skin-like debris, husks, and sloughings.

Banquo:

How now?
 Why do you dress me
 In these strange skins?

Witch 2:

If you look like the serpent,
 Then you are the serpent.

Witch 1:

If you look like the panther
 Then you are the panther

Witch 3:

If you look like the man
 Then you are the man

Witch 2:

And if you look like all of them and yet are none...

Witch 1:

Then you are made of water and of something alien

Tree 1:

Capital!

Banquo

(low moan)

Tree 2:

Ha! This moaning creature was, or had once been, human.

Banquo:

Breathless and refreshed as I have been...

It is that great House wherein all living things
Live together. What are living things?
All creatures that have feelings.
And feel they not?

Exit Banquo**Witch 3:**

More can be done like this.

Tree 1:

And vanquish Macbeth?

Witch 3:

We offer brightness in a formless change.

Witch 1:

Beacon and build another heart for our strangeness
In your garden.

Tree 2:

When I saw the star trails on the water I thought, This is it.
The treaty-making, the treaty-keeping...
But you would change the very air we breathe.

Tree 1:

The rainy season has come and gone. Summer is over.
We are hanging on by a thread.

Tree 2:

I fear a confused distress, a false happiness.

Witch 1:

Then stand with us.
The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day

Tree 3:

We cannot breathe without opening our lungs
 And exhaling the grass and water and sky...
 To breathe the witches is somber.

Tree 1:

We must learn to live with that something.

Scene 4: Lady Macbeth is a villain**Lady Macbeth:**

Our deliberations have produced results. The natives of Florida are becoming
 Extinct.
 What, sir?
 Your tongues shall speak what they think,

Messenger:

In deeds of power and in speech
 I bring of good tidings and of bad.

Lady Macbeth:

Speak then to me.

Messenger:

Artificially the suburbs sequestered more wilderness.

Lady Macbeth:

And?

Messenger:

Our men
 control the Everglades

Lady Macbeth:

Formidable foes. But how were they to know
 Which was the other end of my sword? You see,
 Whoever strikes first, wins.

(pause)

What bad then?

Messenger:

The woods are not gone, although they look so.
And they have taken our spangled Banquo.

Lady Macbeth:

Woe, alas! Banquo is murdered!

Messenger:

T'were better to be with the dead-
He grows worse and worse.
How will he look on his family when
He may only want to eat of them?
I have seen "things else",
but I mean things that are not things.

Lady Macbeth:

What is't you say?

Messenger:

What need we fear them, when death
Looks like a picnic?
He did depart from his body, change shape,
Crawl from his skin like a drowning man.
His spirit is an animal of the Everglades,
a shadow that rolls backwards and forwards over the marsh, writhing.
Out of his senses he ran for the wood, calling out:
"You shall spend the rest of your days
In wondering how long this place has existed.
And you too shall partake in the wonders of it."

Lady Macbeth:

You have put me on edge.
You have stirred me with your prophetic words
The field is darkening.
The foundations are shifting.
The castle is shaken.
But the ghosts don't scare me.
Let the killing of the Everglades be complete.
After all, why waste a river of grass?

**Scene 9: Lady Macbeth's transformation, and
A new state of the world**

Lady Macbeth:

The wood was alive.
It twisted and turned under my fingernails,
Arching its back and curling its tail;
It hung, limp and blind, like an unfed snake.
The roots roved all around me,
They joined in a tangled network
To the systems of other trees.

Tree 1: (*pointing to the witches*)

Lo! here come the charmed charmers,
That smile on both the worlds

Witch 1:

Wood and stone have known it;
Even the humble axe and pestle agree

Witch 3:

In nature is a tyranny; it hath been
The untimely emptying of the happy throne
And the fall of many regents.

Lady Macbeth:

What are you?
A friend? A Sister?

Witch 2:

We come to strike against your use of trees

Lady Macbeth:

Things without all remedy
Should be without regard.
What's done is done.
The world is a broken record.
Every moment, every inch of the world, is a trick.

Tree 2:

Do you not fear the witches?

Witch 3:

Once the rebel,
She will receive what she deserves

Witch 2:

And we will have what we want. Our voice is our sword.

Witch 1:

Come, sisters, cheer we up, give us a hand;
The mind is too full of the macrocosm,
And yet there it is, in the microcosm,
That shows you where to place
The subject of our song.

Witch 3:

Thrice the dolphin,
And thrice the rebel.

Witch 1:

Hurtful to the eye
Are the words of accuracy.
Let it in, Let it in!

Witch 2:

Peace! The charm's wound up.

Lady Macbeth:

A spell!
I smell the salt of the words
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present,
And whisper things my brain can neither see
Nor understand.
O, ruin me, woo me,
And with a skein of fate
Bring me back to my senses!
Look how I sink!

(A thud. Lady Macbeth falls.)

Witch 1:

See to the lady.

Witch 3:

She fell down, and a part of her hair is red.
She is better; but her blood is shed.

Lady Macbeth:

Is this a grave, sir, at last?

Witch 1:

Nothing so grave as you were.
You will live...

Special Effects music.

Lady Macbeth:

This brightness is a formless rage,
a confused distress,
a false happiness.
a touch of the sublime,
a kind of innocence.
A tree? In the woods?
I'm on foot, my lord,
And so perhaps I'm bound to be.
Although -
Although the ground is polluted and the air heavy with smoke,
I dare not resist the lure of this place any longer.

This is so astounding, that in my imagination,
with all its parts combined, I could not tell any of it...

I saw every kind of living creature that had ever existed on Earth.
From marine species to reptilian and from invertebrate to arthropod.
From microscopic creatures to galactic invertebrates,
And everything in-between.

Tree 3:

Such bright
 Sepia-tinted eyes!
 Are they not the color of the sap
 That gathers here?
 Macbeth has leaves!
 A fast-moving ripple of green-gold fuzziness.

Lady Macbeth:

The sisters have made us all fools.
 My fingers are charged with the sun
 I have no home but in the woods

Tree 2:

Then stand with us.
 your feet are tired.
 You have been out in the woods all day.

Lady Macbeth:

My feet? I have forgotten how to walk.

Let me enfold thee and hold thee to my heart.
 There if I grow, the harvest is your own.

Glowing noise.**Witch 2:**

Green leaves with reddish roots
 creep across the fields; they obscure vision, obscure sight.

Witch 3:

The trees feel wet against your
 face as you walk; they blind,
 they crush your eardrums and tongue and
 throat.

Witch 1:

The downpours wash the downpains away,

Witch 2:

The lungs swell and fail; your face and your body, stone and nectar, will never be the same.

Lady Macbeth:

I owe my being to your strange mercy.
Here am I, Lady Macbeth, lost forever.
I went from shock to fascination to sustained blue-green light

Tree 2:

I think that there are probably hundreds of people
in the wide world who get a glimpse
of that which is beyond words.
But then again, maybe I am just dreaming all these restless nights.

Tree 1:

I can feel in my bones the breath of the world around me, and it is not my imagination.

Tree 2:

The stillness of the trees,
The stillness of the water,
The stillness of the bees,
And the stillness of the human face
In the middle of it all.
It is a living creature of some sort.

Tree 1:

It may be stationary, or it may be moving.
It may be in the process of creating itself, or it may not be.
It may be inert, or it may be active.
It may be in a hurry, or it may be slowing down.

Tree 3:

The world is cauldroning away. There is no turning back, not now, not ever.

END