All at once the night is cut by cruel light and cacophony. All at once the ship and its creatures are in terrible danger—and one, the one who will be called E.T., has wandered too far to escape it. Frantically he turns back, his red heartlight fluttering, his squat legs skittering through the fallen leaves. But the Earthmen have planned their mission well. They're all around him now, and the ship cannot wait for a straggler.

Yet despite his fear and alien form, E.T. manages to elude the men throughout the night. Strangely enough, when he's finally found, it's by a boy—and a young boy at that, even by Earth standards. This boy calls himself Elliott. Elliott is different from the others—gentler, farther-seeing. Elliott gives E.T. food and hides him in his house.

But E.T. needs his shipmates—needs them not only for their familiarity, but also for their support. His energy is rapidly running out, and only others of his kind can keep him alive.

E.T. must call them back to Earth.

E.T. must “phone home”—if he can find the parts he needs to build a phone. But he dare not go after them himself—there's too much danger of using up all his energy. Elliott! Elliott must get the pieces, even though the searching men are nearer and more numerous than ever. Oh, if only there is time—!
As the game begins, E.T. appears on your screen and thinks of the pieces he needs to build his "phone": a battery, circuit board, coat hanger, fork, record player, saw blade, tin can, tinfoil, umbrella, and wire. At low levels of difficulty, he needs only a few of these pieces—at higher levels, he needs more, and they must be chosen from among pieces that are similar but of different colors. A piece of the right shape but wrong color won't do him any good.

Next, Elliott appears outside his house in a map of his neighborhood. From this point on, you control Elliott with your joystick. He moves along the streets, the forest paths and hillsides, searching for the phone pieces invisibly hidden there.

As Elliott nears a piece, he hears a special sound. When Elliott comes very near, the piece becomes visible. If it's a piece he wants, move him on top of it and press the button on your joystick to pick it up. If he ever wants to drop the piece, press the button a second time. When he moves away from the piece, it becomes invisible again.

If Elliott has trouble finding pieces or remembering what E.T. needs, he can ask E.T.'s advice through their telepathic link. You stop Elliott's motion and press the red button on your joystick (this won't work while Elliott is holding or standing on a piece). As long as you hold the button down, the pieces E.T. still needs are shown and E.T.'s heartlight glows—red if Elliott's close to a needed piece and blue if he isn't. But this costs E.T. extra energy, so Elliott can't afford to ask for help too often or for too long.
The mothership hangs lavender in the night sky, and to Elliott it looks like a Christmas tree ornament. To E.T. it looks like home. His adventure is almost over.

He turns to the boy once more. “Come?” he asks hopefully.

“Stay,” Elliott answers, though he wishes with all his heart it weren’t so.

The extra-terrestrial embraces his friend fervently, then lifts his glowing finger to the spot between Elliott’s eyes. “I’ll be right here,” he promises.

Then he enters his ship, to the sound of alien welcome, and Elliott can no longer see him. The ship ascends for the final time and vanishes into the star-spangled heavens.

All that remains is a rainbow.