



Happy Ends

Tobias Wrigstad—Vi åker jeep



Ben



Sarah

Happy Ends is

meant to make you happy. To this end, we will explore happy and beautiful situations, try to make situations positive rather than negative. To explore the power in happy endings rather than how deep down in tragedy we can go.

The game is designed around three interwoven themes. The 1st one is a story about a woman, Mary, dealing with the loss of her mother to Alzheimer's. The 2nd is a selection of scenes tied to photos in the first story. The 3rd theme is family counselling scenes, loosely coupled with the rest.

The purpose of the first theme is to tell a real story, that has both happy and sad streaks to it, but that ends on an up-note. The story can be truly beautiful when played out—I have witnessed it twice in my two test-runs of this game at **Dreamation '09**.

The purpose of the second theme is to shift the focus around—let every player be in the spotlight for a while and let the other players turn their attention to him or her. As part of the story of Mary dealing with the loss of her mother—our first theme—Mary is making up stories from a photo album. Each of these photos is a



Margaret



Mary

scene putting one of the players in the center. This part is also meant to be extremely pluggable—creative players can go wild here and there is no need to even play the stories I provide.

The purpose of the third theme is to be calm, thoughtful and honest. As a part of family counselling, a group of four family members will open up to each other and give each other their love.

You are in charge of navigating the space of possibilities in the above. There will be a lot of cutting back and forth between scenes, and it will be easy for the players to get lost. But most importantly, you are the **guardian of happiness**. (To this end, you'll be equipped with a whistle!) This means that it is your job to make sure that the players don't get stuck on the sad and melancholy bits that I've stuck in here to make the happy stand out. This means helping the players to come up with interesting ways of keeping the story happy, and sometimes helping them see the inner beauty in a situation, something that can easily be obscured when you are in it.

Lifting Someone Up!



In every scene revolving around a picture, one player is going to be at the center of the scene and it is the other players' goal to **lift this person up**. In *Happy Ends*, lifting someone up means to **confirm, touch, enable, and aid**. The player in the center should feel that she is acknowledged for who she is. This means accepting her input, listening, respecting and very importantly **making eye contact**. Physical touch is an important part of being recognised and will help reify the feeling of being at the center.

For example, in the picture scene where Karen is telling her brother and parents about her divorce, the idea is for her to feel supported. When Carl is given an opportunity to display canonical fatherly qualities, the rest of the players should help him by giving him proper queues, etc. Regular role-play, except that for a brief stint, one person is expressly the lead character.

The idea is for "bleed" to happen at this point. Bleed is when your feelings and your character's feelings are mixed up. We want to use the power of bleed here to make the players happy through their characters—by being the one in the center getting the attention, or from the satisfaction of doing something for someone else.

The Whistle, Happiness & Hard-Wi- red Sadness

(Make a point of applauding each other between clearly defined scenes. Sometimes, this can be in your way, for example if it is possible to segue seamlessly into the next event, but if you have a clean break anyway, you might as well use it to create a more positive playing experience.)

One of your core tools as a game master is the whistle. **Whenever you blow the whistle, the players must make the scene happier.** Because of the connotations of having a whistle blown at you—you did something wrong—it should be used cautiously with some players who seem to worry too much about their performance.

When testing this technique at Dreamation, there were cases where I, by just reaching for the whistle or looking at it, could change the scene without interrupting it, which is a good thing.

I think that playing happy is harder than playing sad because we are conditioned to go for tragedy by many games we've played in the past. At least many games

that I've seen, played or written. The purpose of the whistle is to keep the players in check in that respect, but also to be able to challenge them, for example by requiring them to turn happiness up to eleven in several scenes, etc. Just make sure it does not turn into comedy.

Blowing the whistle is a sometimes necessary reminder that a scene is focusing on the wrong parts. Granted, some sadness is necessary in the game to make the happiness stand out. But to make things hard, I took the liberty of hard-wiring that in the story about Mary and there really shouldn't be any more sadness than the one there.

Preparing for the game

Tentative game structure

Let the players read the story about Mary and her mother. Then make a list of scenes together that you are interested in playing, preferably linearly. About ten is a good number, and for each scene write down a **title**, a line to remind you **what** you were thinking, and **who** is in the scene. This should take roughly 20 minutes including reading the story. Assign players to characters so that someone is always Mary, Margaret, Sarah and Ben (see the story text).

Then you, the game master, adds the five family counselling sessions, one before the first scene, one after the last scene and the other ones somewhere where it looks appropriate. Also reserve a block somewhere in the middle for the picture scenes. You should not pre-plan

these, but let them stem from what's happened in the game already. Feel free to use the whistle already at this stage if the players are too keen to focus on tragedy.

The game area is to be divided into four areas: Mary's home, The Hospital, At the Counsellor's, and Pictures. This is not super important, but I believe it will help the players separate the different activities that makes up the game. There will always be three different other places to go to from a scene, and that will hopefully aid creativity.

Mary moves in with her mother
Mary & Sarah get along great
Sarah is a confused bitch

Sarah dies

Mary meets Margaret
First phone call with Ben

Mary starts seeing Margaret regularly
Mary starts calling Ben regularly

Karen catches Mary with Margaret
Suicide call to Ben
Karen comes to forgive Mary

Mary and Ben meet
Mary finds the photo albums

Mary's story

Counselling scenes

Picture scenes

(Approx 3-4 hours)

Ending the Game

The game ends after the last family counselling session with Karen in focus. As the therapist, you inform the players that the time is up, and that they have done a great job. Remind them to keep telling people that are important to them that they are, and that there is no such thing as "fake" happiness. Then **give them a whistle each**, and end the game.

Now follows a description of the three themes, a quick discussion on how to play them, and that's it. Best of luck, and most of all, *health and happiness!*



Theme One:

“Mary & her Mother”

Before I run through the story in the order I think it should be played, I'll nominally introduce the four characters: **Mary**, our lead role, her mother **Sarah**, **Margaret**, who becomes Mary's surrogate mother and **Ben**, the suicide hot-line operator. Mary and Ben are next-door neighbors. Ben is a volunteer suicide hot-line operator that takes his calls in the comfort of his own home. When Mary talks to Ben on the phone, she has no idea who he is. Now to the story.

The main character of the first theme is Mary, a woman just below 40, who's all alone in the world. Mary's father died ten years ago in the same car accident that put her mother Sarah in a wheelchair. Two years ago, Sarah was diagnosed with Alzheimer's—and things went downhill

from there, as they do. Mary decided to move in with her mother to care for her. To not put her in a home. She had to quit her job, give up her apartment. She had to sacrifice.

But Mary is no angel. She does this to finally get close to her mother, a mother that she believes never cared much for her in the first place. A mother that was always too busy with her own career. A mother she's repeatedly wished would have died in the place of her father. This is the last chance for them to reconcile, Mary figures. A chance worth taking, even if the price is high.

The first few weeks go spectacularly well. Sarah is much less strict than she was when Mary was young and it used to drive her mad. The first weeks show them sides of each other that they hadn't seen before. A good time that passes quickly.

Then, the illness gets the upper hand, and Sarah changes for the worse. The disease makes her confused, the confusion makes her scared, and the fear makes her angry—and she takes it all out on Mary. Because she is the only one around. Mary gets blamed for not taking care of her properly, for forgetting things or hiding things or messing with her mind. But most importantly, she is definitely not Sarah's daughter.

Sarah is “alone,” waiting for a daughter that will never come, because she is already there.

Sarah is hospitalised after refusing to eat for some time, and dies shortly after. And there is Mary, in a waiting room for the terminally ill resounding with the silence from the turned-off heartbeat monitor and the tubes that no-one is breathing through anymore. The loss hits her unexpectedly hard.

Having said goodbye to her mother and informed the hospital staff that her mother's passed, Mary leaves the ward. But just as she is going through the door, supposedly for the last time, she hears the voice of an old woman. “Karen?” Looking

around, Mary sees an old lady that's just dropped her canes on the floor. Mary, hastens to assist her, and here is the story's first real turning point. Margaret, the old woman, is another Alzheimer patient, but still sharp and alive. Mary walks Margaret back to her room, and they strike up a conversation.

Margaret tells Mary of Karen, her daughter, who was supposed to visit today. Margaret's been longing to go to the park for many days now, while it is still warm outside, but it looks like it will not happen. Mary offers her assistance, and the two of them spend a lovely day in the park.

A day later, Mary calls a suicide hotline. Maybe because she wants to be talked down from taking her life. Or just because she wants someone to miss her when she's gone. She has her mother's pain killers with the red warning label and some alcohol. The voice of the guy at the other end of the line is nice. He listens patiently, asking questions. But mostly, he is a living breathing person that she connects to. To turn her mind to the positives, he asks her if she hasn't had a good thing happen to her lately, and Mary tells him about Margaret. Mary and the phone operator strike a deal that she will go back and see

the old woman again and then call him back and report in a week. He gives her the number to his phone so she can bypass the switch.

Mary goes back to visit Margaret. It turns out that Margaret and her daughter are working their way through old photo albums, a couple of pages every visit. The room's only shelf has six sturdy albums with old black-and-white pictures, over-saturated old colour photographs, and obvious digital printouts. Margaret and Karen started from the beginning and are working their way to the present. Karen is reluctant to move on, Margaret complains, as if Margaret's life would be somehow linked to whether there were photos still to talk about.

Mary calls back to the guy on the hot-line to report. She is proud and happy, and he encourages her. He tells her that he hopes that she will never call again.

Mary visits Margaret more and more frequently. As time passes, Margaret slips away slowly and starts confusing Mary for Karen. She points at the albums and asks Mary to tell her the stories of her life for her as she can no longer remember them herself. And all of a sudden, Mary finds herself in the

middle of telling Margaret the most exquisite lies about the life that she wishes she had. And Margaret nods as if she remembered, and pats her reassuringly.

Every year, the family goes on vacation in some old cottage by a lake near a pine forest, Mary can tell from browsing the albums. They take a picture every year, standing in the same spot. The children grow older. The grand parents too. Mary looks at the photos and lets her fantasies roam free. And Margaret nods as if she remembered, and pats her reassuringly.

Mary is now calling Ben, the guy on the hot-line regularly. Ben is acting very unprofessionally, and there is an obvious chemistry between them. Gradually, he starts talking about himself.

Mary's life is now centered around two things: visiting Margaret and then calling Ben to report.

One day as Mary is paying her usual visit and is highly involved in telling a story from some pictures in one of the albums, two strangers barge in. This is Karen—Margaret's actual daughter—and her husband Alex. Mary recognises them from the pictures. Who are you and what are you doing here?, Karen demands to know. Mary quickly excuses herself.

Going home from the hospital Mary reflects on the past weeks and what she's been up to. Instead of taking control over her life and clearing out Sarah's apartment, she's been spending all her time at the hospital lying her ass off to a confused Alzheimer's patient. She's been clinging to Margaret instead of getting over Sarah's death.

And out come the pills again, and the alcohol. She proceeds to call Ben for the last time, to give the last report.

Mary is sad and crying. She is ashamed over what she's done and that hurts a lot. Ben is trying to console her, but it is futile. Finally, she calms down.

At this point, someone rings Ben's door bell. He excuses himself and goes to the door. A woman (Karen) is standing outside asking for a Mary Watson. He realises that's his neighbor's name, and points to the door just opposite and then hurries back to the phone.

Ben gets back on the phone and they speak for about 5 seconds before Mary's door bell rings, and it is now that Ben starts suspecting what we've known from the start. Mary puts the phone down and opens the door.

And there is Karen, who's tracked her down easily by asking the people at the

hospital. Mary starts apologising, but is interrupted by Karen suddenly hugging her.

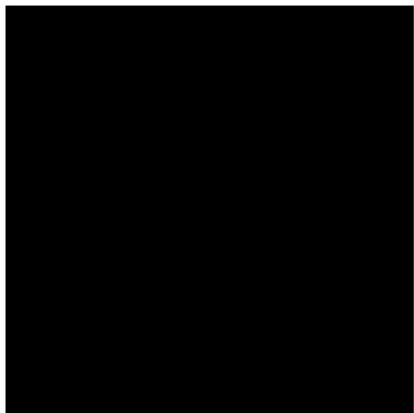
Karen explains that Margaret just passed and that she's talked to the nurses at the ward and that they told her how often Mary's visited her mother and how much attention and help she's given her. Karen's been too busy and also too afraid to visit Margaret, and she is so thankful that someone's been there in her stead.

Mary tries to explain that she's been lying to Margaret all the time, but Karen brushes that off. My mother had Alzheimer's, who cares if you told her stories that weren't true!? Memories are what controls whether something is true or false, not if something actually did or did not happen. What's important is you were there and gave her good memories. Not whose life they were from.

They hug again, and Karen asks if she can take Mary out to dinner to thank her at some point. She gives Mary a picture of Margaret from one of the albums and her phone number, and leaves.

ASIDE: This game would not have been if it weren't for Thorbiörn Fritzon, Frederik Berg Østergaard and Olle Jons-son, who blow the whistle at me whenever I need it.

And on top of that, they've read, commented, listened, helped me with everything.



Mary goes back and picks up the phone, but there is no-one there. She calls Ben's number on speed-dial, but there is no answer. After five signals, her door bell rings again, and she hangs up the phone. She opens her door to the man outside, the neighbor she's seen before many times, and now it clicks for her too. Ben is Ben. That Ben.

They embrace.

Mary shows Ben the picture of Margaret, and they go to put it in a frame. Looking at the walls for the first time in a long while, Mary realises that there are no pictures anywhere. Sarah stowed those away when she was frustrated by not being

able to remember who these people were. And when Ben and Mary start digging through the boxes for a picture frame for Margaret's picture, they come across a box with Mary's mother's photo albums. Pictures of Sarah hugging Mary tight. Sarah smiling at her on the jetty by the lake where they used to go every year for vacation. Fishing trips. Sarah crying at Mary's wedding.

Maybe Karen was right. Maybe memories really are what control whether something is true or false. And if so, she's been a prisoner to hers—or her lack of them. She points Ben to a picture of a happy family and and begins to tell.

End of story.

How to Play Mary's Story

Note: as part of the game package, there should be four copies of the story for the players to read. This copy is edited down to facilitate quick reading.

(A quicker, alternative way of playing the game is by instructing the players what happens next.)

How to play Mary's story is largely decided by the players in the phase when they are reading the story and planning this part of the game. They are of course free to change the story for the better, as are you. If you start by playing Mary living with her mother, it is important to have both sad and happy moments.

I have toyed with e.g., Mary trying to make Sarah some dinner and breaking some old inherited porcelain platter and Sarah just brushing it off—"I always hated those ones anyway." If you want to establish the sadness here, throw in directly after this, "So, when is my daughter coming?" This allows for a

nice parallel when Margaret later does exactly the opposite—starts calling Mary her daughter.

An alternate version of playing the story is to tell everything as a flashback. Mary is on the phone with Ben from the start, and every scene in the story is she telling him about it over the phone. Whatever works for you—I find it players have an easier time investing in the story if they are given more degrees of freedom.



Theme Two:

"The Pictures"

The picture scenes are opportunities for exploring happy scenes, happy memories and for shifting the focus around between the players. Every picture scene has **one player in focus**, and **all the other players' attention is directed onto her**.

Every picture scene is a story that Mary tells Margaret in her room at the hospital. Every memory has a "problem" that needs solving. Before every visit, ask the players if they have ideas for what to play. If they do, then let them decide what happens, but help them choose a focus for the scene and a problem. Either you steer them covertly on the fly, or

tell them up front. Presumably, a healthy mix of telling them what to do and letting them roam wild is a good idea.

Margaret's children are Bob and Karen. Her husband's name is Carl. Invent other characters as you need them.

As many picture scenes as possible should start with a photograph, preferably taken by the cottage that the family rented every year for their vacation. We might see boyfriends come and go, details changed in the picture, etc. But this might not be suitable always.

Example Picture Scenes

The imaginary romance is supposed to be a cute story likely to be told for many years as one of those family stories that makes families families.

Karen is getting a divorce

In this scene, **KAREN** tells her family that she is getting a divorce from Alex, her husband. She first tells her mother, who gives her understanding and love. She then tells her brother, who offers to kick the crap out of Alex. Last, she tells her father, who tells her that at one point, he and Margaret was about to separate and that she is not the first to have this happen to her. Essentially, they all give her different kinds of comfort: the mother gives her unconditional love; the brother offers to do the stupid things for her that she cannot, and assumes some of her rage; the father let's her know that she is not alone.

[Central character in CAPS.]

Imaginary romance

When **BOB** was little, he had a huge crush on Anne, the girl next door. He managed to convince her that their respective imaginary friends would get married. The scene can f.ex. be a scene where some parent is talking to them about love and sex and they are blaming their imaginary friends for whatever seems appropriate. The imaginary friends are played by two other players and Bob and Anne are talking about what their imaginary friends are doing, or even the marriage ceremony. The problem that needs solving is getting Bob's affection for Anne out in the open and for her to respond. Remember, a happy ending does not need to mean that the feelings are mutual—it could be Bob running to Karen very proud that he finally worked up the courage to ask.

The family throws Margaret a surprise party

MARGARET did not see it coming. There is a cake with candles, and presents.

Pretended happiness also creates true happiness. If the scene works, maybe let it last just a little bit longer than the players expect, if possible. A good way is to turn the scene into a challenge by using the whistle 100 times.

Last Semester in High-school

It is **KAREN's** last semester in high-school and all of a sudden, people are acting all mature. Rather than competing or being dickheads, they say nice things to each other, talk about the future, and offer advice. Focus should be on Karen, and that she is going to be able to do whatever she wants.

Bob makes a pass at Alice

BOB ends up riding besides Alice on the bus to school. He makes a couple of failed attempts at striking up a conversation. Then a ticket officer boards and starts checking peoples' fare cards, and when Bob opens up his wallet to display his, there, in one

of the pockets is a condom, and it falls out! Alice immediately sees what it is and their hands brush against each other when they both try to pick it up. "Why do you have a condom?!" she says, not without interest. The ice is broken, and she seems interested. "Have you done it?", she asks. When the other kids try to taunt them, "Bob has a girl friend! Bob has a girl friend!", Alice kisses him.

Coming Out of the Closet

BOB finally tells his family that he is gay. It is tough and takes guts and it turns out they knew long before he did. The reason why his dad never laughed at those gay jokes on the TV shows wasn't because he hated homosexuals, as Bob thought, but because of respect for his son.

Fishing Trip

CARL accidentally cuts himself during a fishing trip. They are pretty far out and he is the only one that really knows how to navigate this area of the archipelago. The scene shows Carl being able to keep the situation in control and keeping his kids from panicking, even though he is bleeding all over.

End of Youth, for Real Separation

CARL brings cigars to work after getting word that his wife is pregnant with Karen. He shares his fears and his anxiety with his co-workers who comfort him and try to lift his spirit by sharing similar worries and how it all turned out in the end.

Carl and **MARGARET** are separating. They have reached the decision together and are quite content. They are helping each other go through the stuff to sort out who gets what. This brings up memories and they reconnect. Here it is possible to use the other players as Carl and Margaret in memories of when they were still together.

Running picture scenes

Every picture scene represents Mary visiting Margaret at the hospital. One way of starting these scenes is by starting from the top with Mary knocking on the door frame to Margaret's hospital room. Then quickly segue into looking at the photo albums and going from there. The player who first has an idea of a story to tell from one of the pictures simply grabs the floor, quickly instructs the other players and off you go. In my experience, coming up with scenes that can be spun in a happy way is not that easy, so the players might need help. The examples I list above can be cannibalised to that

end—steal bits and pieces of them and inject in the scenes the players come up with instead of playing these scenes by the book.

Each scene is meant to have a key person ("Who is this scene about?") and this key person should have a problem ("What is this person trying to accomplish?", etc.). This will essentially establish the end conditions for the scene and how other player can help.

It is your job to cut the picture scenes appropriately. Remember that shorter is better than longer.



Theme Three:

“Family Counsel- ling”

In the family counselling scenes, a family of four are trying to get over a loss. The family is Karen and Alex, and their grown-up kids Tommy and Annika. The lost one is Margaret, and the family is doing bad because Karen is depressed and blaming herself for not being there enough for Margaret, for living her life instead of spending more time with her mother.

There will be exactly five family counselling scenes. The first and the last is with Karen. Except for the first scene with Karen, every counselling scene follows the exact same

structure: someone is in focus and the other players take turns looking into her eyes, holding her hands, and telling her what about her they love and why they love her. The first scene is also like that, except they are telling Karen what she could do differently to improve herself.

These scenes should be fairly quick. 5 minutes tops, and essentially happen once every hour so that these five scenes frame the rest of the game.

Crossovers between this part and the picture scenes are very good.



Tobias

Huge playtesting thanks to Matt Weber, Nicholas Marshall, Rachel Walton, Kevin Allen Junior Emily Care Boss, Epidiah Ravachol, Julia Lower & Remi Trauer.

Playtesting at Dreamation '09.
Premier at Fastaval '09.

So, this was Happy Ends. Hopefully, it will create beautiful stories in which good things happen to people who deserve it. Feel free to use the whistle to make this happen, or to repeat a scene until it is just right. The last couple of scenes can probably be played without any breaks in-between to make for a kind of crescendo before rounding off with the final counselling scene. I really hope this works for you.

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Happy Ends is a jeepform
drama for four player and
one game master. 3-4
hours of happyness.

You'll need a whistle, papers
pencils and a large enough
space to move around.

