

# “We Are Not All Alone Unhappy”

Cat Manning

“We Are Not All Alone Unhappy” is a short interactive narrative piece made in Twine which interrogates the idea of the Shakespearean happy ending. It asks players to create a pairing between two characters who received canonically unhappy endings in Shakespeare’s plays. I refer to it as a “Shakespearean sandbox” to convey the sense of plucking the characters from their particular textual grounding and placing them in an ambiguously modern world in which they can all interact.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it references the events of the plays; the characters still remember betrayal and murder, and have not (necessarily) forgiven those who wronged them. These characters carry their personalities and preoccupations into these meetings, and success or failure in a conversation is determined by (my judgment of) what might fulfill each character’s emotional arc. Failure text hints at what each character is looking for, and who might fulfill that; however, some hints are based upon my own imaginative reconstructions of events that do not happen in Shakespeare’s texts.

This is a project deeply contingent on my own readings of Shakespeare, which themselves are contingent on my reading, education, the productions I’ve seen—my lived experience. As such, it does not pretend to supersede other readings or performances of the plays, or other creative depictions of these characters. Instead, I want to position this as a reparative project, in the manner of Eve Sedgwick’s reparative reading; it aims, in Sedgwick’s words, to “assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.”<sup>2</sup> The design of “We Are Not All Alone Unhappy” is intentionally constructed around multiplicity. It offers the player the opportunity to explore and then to decide if they are satisfied with the narratives they’ve witnessed, or if they’d like to shake up the sandbox and see what else awaits. The “reparative writing” involved in this project, as connected to reparative reading, allows spaces for my intent to be subverted or rejected; for readers or players to make their own versions of my project that are closer to their own needs; for pleasure, aesthetic, and fun to flourish. This last point is why I commissioned a UI that exceeds my own artistic abilities:

I wanted “We Are Not All Alone Unhappy” to feel a bit like a teenager’s diary, and to consciously embrace the aspects of the project that felt akin to fanfiction, and which are not always centered in discussions of reading practices of early modern texts.<sup>3</sup>

Sedgwick’s model of reparative reading, influenced by psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and queer theory, is (I believe) particularly useful given the characters I’ve chosen to include. While there are nine characters, for reasons of gameplay balance and to prevent a combinatoric explosion, I chose each one specifically because I felt they were dismissed, neglected, or treated cruelly by other characters in their play of origin. I have seen these characters considered through lenses of gender, sexuality, race, and class in textual interpretations or in production; often, they are dismissed by other characters in their original plays for these reasons. Giving a space for redemptive experiences to those characters whose tragic arcs often intersected with ways in which they were marginalized, even if—especially if—that space is itself marginal, fragmented, and noncanonical feels appropriate.

“Pairing off” was also an aspect I wanted to deconstruct, especially because the focus of gameplay is in selecting a pairing of exactly two characters. While many of the comedies end with pairing off into heterosexual marriages, some of which even involve love, many of these marriages seem unsatisfying or cruel to the characters involved. At the end of *Measure for Measure*, it is difficult to imagine a harmonious future for Mariana and Angelo, and Isabella is not even given a line to consent to or refuse the Duke’s proposal. Phebe’s acceptance of Silvius at the end of *As You Like It* is not exactly a satisfying moment of romantic agency. And Lorenzo and Jessica’s potential issues in *The Merchant of Venice* are foreshadowed by the couple’s comparisons of their relationship to the doomed lovers of myth. I wanted my alternative endings to celebrate connection, and particularly the suggestion that platonic intimacy can be just as meaningful and deep as romantic.

Recuperation in “We Are Not All Alone Unhappy” comes from connection: a character’s story that has been abruptly truncated or that primarily serves to advance a plot is given a new perspective by the introduction of a second character with a very different textual narrative. ‘Failure’ vignettes, then, serve two purposes. They demonstrate that not all relationships can be successful or mutually beneficial, but they simultaneously allow the recuperative project of giving personality and agency to these characters to continue. These vignettes are presented as prose rather than the dialogue that characterizes the successful connections in order to convey a

sense of remove: both the player’s remove from the characters’ interaction, and each character’s remove from the other. However disastrous these moments may be for the characters experiencing them, they are temporary; there is always a new success to discover or an old one to fall back on. And of course, the opposite holds true; even a happy ending can be soured by failure states. The choice lies with the reader: which state they believe to be canonical, and what, if anything, to reject or ignore.

The purpose of “We Are Not All Alone Unhappy” is to gesture at the possibility space of reparative narratives for these characters, not to entirely fulfill that potential. There are characters missing from this experiment that would have been interesting to include; their absence suggests that this world I have built is deliberately incomplete. Rather, I sketch out a space and invite players to imagine within it. What happens after these vignettes I’ve proposed occur? What might happen if other characters were introduced? How might these stories shift if another reading of a character is substituted for the one I propose? I close with these questions as an invitation to consider and as a way to join in the process of reparative reading and writing that this project gestures towards.

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<sup>1</sup> In gaming, a “sandbox” often refers to a large open-world space in which the player can select tasks in a loose order that is rarely imposed by the world state. I use the term here instead to reflect children’s playground stories, in which plastic robots and dolls can exist in the same world by virtue of being brought into the space together.

<sup>2</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You”, in *Touching Feeling*, Duke University Press, 2002, p. 123-151.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Olson’s “The Continuing Adventures of Blanchardyn and Eglantine: Responsible Speculation about Early Modern Fan Fiction” has been useful for me in thinking through questions around the sort of texts and conversations we center or neglect in academia, and why certain registers are written off. “We Are Not All Alone Unhappy” deliberately embraces the speculative power she suggests early modern scholarship incorporate.

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