

Of Hope and White Wings; A Review of Hatoful Boyfriend

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Never in my life did I anticipate I would be calling a bird dating simulator a literary masterpiece.

Title: Hatoful Boyfriend

Release Date: July 31st, 2011

Medium: Video game/visual novel

Developer: Hato Moe/PigeoNation Inc.

Genre: Dating simulator/otome, comedy, horror (yes, really)

Where to Play: Steam, iOS, Android, Playstation 4/Vita

Average Length: 10 hours

My Rating: 10/10

Introduction

There are a myriad of restrictions around what exactly one person can do with another person in a long-distance friendship. When you aren't physically side by side, occupying the same space, there's a limit to what you can do to spend time together. Luckily, the contemporary internet has made maintaining a long-distance friendship significantly easier, and considering most of my friends live in other states and countries, I'm rather thankful for it. Streaming allows us to watch movies or other such things together, multiplayer features in video games open up opportunities for a way to spend time together, the list goes on and on. However, of all of the games I've ever experienced with another person, the visual novel *Hatoful Boyfriend* certainly takes the crown for the strangest.

In June of 2020, a dear friend of mine sent me a message asking me if I'd like to watch him play a visual novel he'd purchased a few years back but never got around to playing, and I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the concept. *Hatoful Boyfriend* is part of the dating simulator genre, which is a type of visual novel which has gameplay revolving around spending time with and romancing fictional characters. It's a strange type of game as is, but *Hatoful Boyfriend* is unique in that the entire cast of characters beyond the human protagonist are birds. I definitely found it strange at a glance, but it sounded like a silly, fun time for a laugh with a friend, so I ultimately agreed. Neither one of us were prepared for just how far from laughable this game would be.

As someone who consumes a lot of media, from literature to visual media to video games, I've discovered that some of the most compelling stories can be found in the places you'd least anticipate, and *Hatoful Boyfriend* is no exception. While the fact that the characters are all birds is certainly a comedic premise, the strange choice is little more than a veneer meant to hide a beautifully tied-together plot, a commentary on the finite nature of life, and a painful story of war, ethics, self-discovery, and love. So, it's time to prepare to suspend some of that disbelief, and join me on a venture into the school of hope and white wings, St. Pigeonation's -- mind the spoilers!

St. Pigeonation's

As a game that falls under the dating simulator genre, one of the most significant aspects of *Hatoful Boyfriend* is its setting and character cast, and it does not disappoint. The game is set in an alternative version of Earth where the majority of the human population has died out, and mutated birds that have gained the capacity for language and intelligence now widely populate the earth and run society. The game initially does not provide much explanation surrounding why, but it can be easily sensed that there's something sinister underlying the massive shift in the world's governance. However, the revelations to be found about the reasoning for the world should come into play in a discussion of the true ending.

The main setting is a fictional school, St. Pigeonation's Institute, which is a high school specifically fashioned to teach a student body of birds -- the one exception to this rule is the

playable protagonist, whose name is up to the player but is referred to by default as Hiyoko Tohsaka, a high school girl who lives in a cave in the wilderness and is a hunter-gatherer. She has an abundance of personality, being a boisterous and chipper young lady whose loud but loving nature allows for a great deal of comedy and sweet moments alike. In a genre of games where playable protagonists are often meant to be a blank slate for the player to project on, her wild, bright-eyed personality is a refreshing surprise; her personality does not limit choice in gameplay, either, allowing her role in the story to feel natural but not robbing the player of all choice and autonomy.



The humanized cast of Hatoful Boyfriend; from left to right, there's Shuu Iwamine, Kazuaki Nanaki, Nageki Fujishiro, Anghel Higure, Yuuya Sakazaki, Sakuya Le Bel Shirogane, Ryouta Kawara, and Okosan, who does not have a humanized form. The art is done by the creator, Hato Moa.

The classmates and faculty of St. Pigeonation's are the primary driving force of the story, and each one has a story or "route" of their own to explore, which can be unlocked depending on how much time you spend with them. While the characters in game are given portraits taken from pictures of real-life birds, when each character is introduced, a humanized rendition of them is also provided alongside the bird pictures. There's Ryouta Kawara, Hiyoko's childhood friend, who is a kind and hardworking rock dove who's prone to bouts of illness, Nageki Fujishiro, a solemn and withdrawn mourning dove who mysteriously never leaves the library, Sakuya Le Bel Shirogane, an aristocratic fantail dove who seems snobbish and elitist at first, his older half-brother, Yuuya Sakazaki, a charming and flirtatious fantail dove with no shortage of secrets to hide, Anghel Higure, a delightfully odd Luzon bleeding-heart dove who seems entirely disconnected from reality, Okosan, a boisterous fantail dove obsessed with pudding who is based off the game creator's own pet dove, Kazuaki Nanaki, a perpetually-sleepy button quail who serves as the homeroom teacher, and Shuu Iwamine, the sinister and murderous partridge who works as the school's doctor.

Each of the characters' respective routes reveals more about what lies beneath the surface-level impression, for better or for worse, and their character development is all handled with astonishing grace and attention. Ryouta, Nageki, and Sakuya all shine in particular for being compelling and human characters, despite being birds; Nageki's story, which reveals him to be a ghost bound to the library by his own lingering attachments, is one of the most somber and compelling of the character stories, while Ryouta and Sakuya shine the brightest in the game's true ending -- or, the route of the game considered to be the official string of events -- as their characterizations and perceptions of their world evolve. Ultimately, however, each character plays a fundamental role in the overarching story (including Okosan, who is often regarded as a joke character), and each one is fascinating in their own unique way -- even if

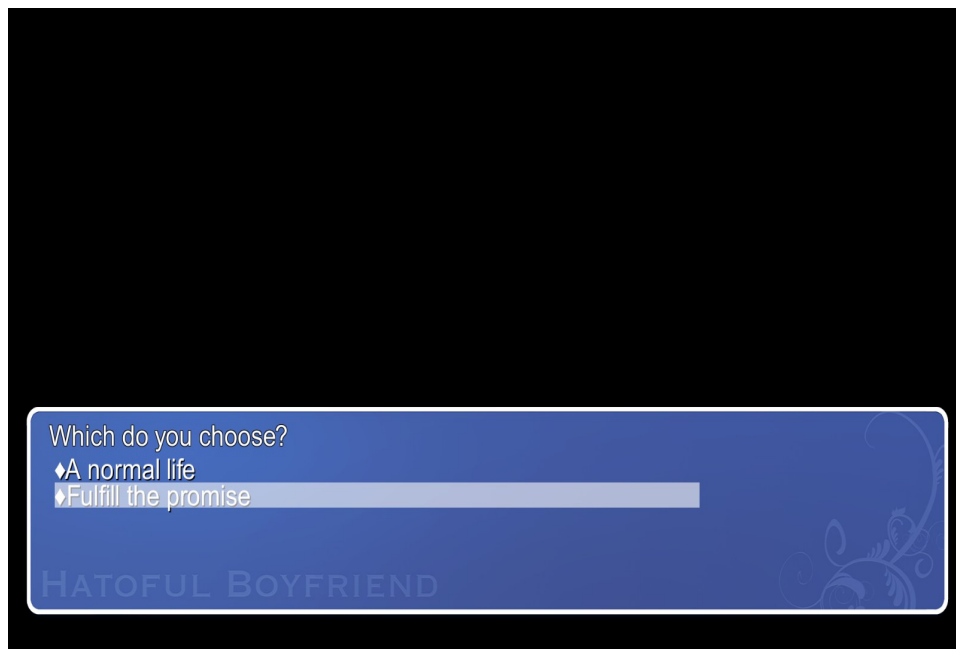
some are more bizarre than others. Special mention should go to Dr. Iwamine, who, despite his cryptic and murderous tendencies, has an incredibly compelling story and is a stellar example of a villainous character who manages to be both despicable and fascinating all at once.

There is a lot to be said for the joys of the character cast; each one is delightfully nuanced and balances both comedic and tragic aspects flawlessly. But it's difficult to truly talk about the characters without getting into the story itself; and yes, believe it or not, there is a phenomenal story to talk about.

The True Ending: Bad Boys' Love

There are fourteen different potential endings to talk about with *Hatoful Boyfriend*; each of the potential love interests has one or two routes of their own. On top of this, there is one bad ending in which the protagonist is mysteriously assassinated by a political faction known as the Hawk Party, and two side-story endings involving a plot at the Torimi cafe, in which you can either nudge two estranged birds back into each other's lives or date one of them yourself. However, the main event of it all would be the "BBL" (or Bad Boys' Love) ending, which ties every loose end together into a rich and unsettling story.

After playing through the game enough times, the next time you start up a new file, you are given the mysterious prompt to either pursue a normal life or to fulfill the promise; choosing the former simply leads you through the game as normal, but the latter option is the catalyst for the game's "true ending." The game starts as normal, with each in-game week offering the same choices and prompts, but now they are suddenly interspersed with vague memory fragments from the protagonist and Ryouta's childhood, including the memory of her parents' deaths and the approach of a strange man who offers to grant a wish for them both.



When the in-game date reaches September 2nd, everything changes; the protagonist decides to go check on Ryouta in the infirmary, and the point of view switches from her own perspective to Ryouta's, revealing that Hiyoko fails to show up for class the following morning. Ryouta is sent to go and retrieve a box of handouts for his class, and when it is opened, the protagonist's severed head is found inside -- the rest of her dismembered body parts were similarly found in the handout boxes for other homerooms. All students are ordered to go to the gym, where Ryouta and Sakuya decide to unravel the mysteries of Hiyoko's death themselves.

From that point onward, a myriad of revelations are given; humanity's fall is explained as having occurred through a deadly mutation of the H5N1 Virus (bird flu), and the development of a counter-virus meant to kill off the carriers of the strain wound up leading to the evolution of avian minds and bodies, giving them enough presence and power to become the dominant species, putting them at war against what is left of the human species. This deep-set animosity between birds and humans carried on well into the modern day despite endeavors at peace, and one of the two major political factions, the Hawk Party, still aims for the extinction of humanity through the use of bioweapons. Nageki's death in the past is revealed to have been suicide by self-immolation, as he was one of these aforementioned bioweapons and had no desire to be one; his adoptive brother, Hitori Uzune, never bounced back from this loss, and later changed his name and face to become Kazuaki Nanaki. Ryouta himself is also revealed to be one of these unwilling bioweapons, and is nearly driven mad from the revelation. Dr. Iwamine is shown to be the orchestrator of all of this -- as an agent of the Hawk Party who was once coworkers with Ryouta's deceased father, Ryuuji, and harbored unrequited feelings for him, he'd made a promise to Ryuuji on the latter's deathbed, agreeing to strive to fulfill a wish for Ryouta should they ever cross paths. The events of the game can all be tied back to Iwamine's warped perception of Ryouta's wish for peace, as Iwamine believes that tranquility between the two intelligent species can only be found when one of them is completely wiped out.

The majority of the game's time factors into this ending; when my friend and I played through it, I believe we spent about six to eight hours here alone, without any breaks. It's simply impossible to put down when you've started, so I recommend accounting for such a thing if you desire to play it yourself. Most of the story's richer qualities come in here, and there's an amplitude of twists, turns, and spectacular character development for our leading birdies -- honestly, it's better experienced than described. However, the fact of the matter is that there is a great deal of care put into the plot, and it makes for an extraordinary and uncomfortably pertinent story about topics like genocide, bioweaponry, warfare, and racism, as well as how horrifying the interference of political matters in the lives of others can become and how dangerous prejudice can be from either side.

The entirety of this true ending is very grim, with a prominent tonal shift from the rest of the game; while there were elements of horror, bittersweetness, and tragedy within the other stories, BBL is entirely devoted to these elements, and every painful moment of it is excellently handled. Hato Moe, the creator, does not hold back in her grim worldbuilding and storytelling, and she leaves no loose ends remaining when the story comes to a close. While the rest of the game is certainly enjoyable and fun in its own right, I would argue that BBL is the true reason to

play it. It is not an exaggeration to say that I walked out of this game a different woman than I was going into it.



"I'll be waiting... at the dawn."

The Narrative Perfection

I've played through this game a grand total of two times, now, beginning to end and with each story, and I can say with confidence that this is a rare example of a story with little to no plot holes. Yes, some suspension of disbelief is required for the premise of the game, but the call for such a thing is nothing new in storytelling, and I think the ridiculousness of it all only adds to the richness.

Every one-off comment or oddity in the story is explained somehow; Nanaki's described as smelling of bleach at one point in the game, and when asked about it, he brushes it off with a quirky comment about how he took a nap in the washing machine not long ago. It's an odd thing to say, but is well-suited to the eccentricities of the game as a whole, and most players tend not to think twice about it. However, with the revelation that he once went by the name Hitori Uzune and was depicted as a red quail, the nature of that comment and the pale color of Kazuaki's feathers makes a lot more sense. The game is interspersed with little moments like these, and it is fascinating how beautifully they all come together to complete and enhance the worldbuilding, character development, and storytelling.

While BBL is the main event of the story, all of the other routes tie together beautifully to enhance the tragedy it gives us; the story's quirks and eccentricities are not pointless or solely comedic, and paint a splendid picture when you put them all together.

My Rating

Some might argue that I'm being generous when I say this game has earned a ten out of ten in my book, but I would disagree. The gameplay is perhaps not the most varied out there, but this gameplay style is a staple of the visual novel genre and should be par for the course for anyone seeking to play one; therefore, I see no point in criticizing the mechanics, as they pertain more to genre and less to the developer's own choice. Beyond the gameplay itself, *Hatoful Boyfriend* is a delightfully odd premise with a beautiful and painful payoff, and the story and characters alone are ample reason to give it a try.

I genuinely mean it when I say this game is a masterpiece, and unfortunately, plenty of people only interact with it on a surface-level; the sheer comedy that comes from a dating simulator about birds tends to be too effectively deceptive, and ultimately prevents many players from realizing just how immersive and beautifully-written the game is as a whole. So if this game falls onto your radar, don't turn up your nose at the concept of a bird dating simulator; St. Pigeonation's is well worth the visit.



About the Author

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Emma Sheedlo is an aspiring fiction author currently living in Johnson City, Tennessee and attending East Tennessee State University. She has every intention of one day writing fantasy and sci-fi novels, but for now, she's content to simply focus on getting her degrees settled. She is an avid lover of card games, birds, and all manner of literature, and most of her own personal works revolve around the concept of death and the nature of mortality. She's a lover of all things macabre and existential, and is more than happy to introduce any readers to works including them.