
Romancing Pigeons

The Deconstruction of the Dating-Sim in Hatoful Boyfriend

Nicolle Lamerichs

Interspecies Romance

When pictures circulated online of a dating game that starred doves, many gamers suspected it to be a hoax. Promotional screenshots for the game portrayed photographs of actual birds, copied on illustrated backgrounds of class rooms and parks. The quality of the screenshots made this inter-species dating-sim seem quite unlikely. It had to be a spoof, except that it was not.

Hatoful Boyfriend (MIST[PSI]PRESS, 2011) gained popularity and critical attention through a play through by Angie Gallant at Quarter to Three forums increased the popularity of the game (Fahey, 2011). Bedridden, she started playing the game on November 28, 2011, and posted a “Let’s Play” account of screenshots with engaging and funny comments. Many fans and reviewers became acquainted with the game not by playing it, but by reading Angie’s hilarious walkthrough. Hatoful Boyfriend quickly became a cult favourite among fans of Japanese popular culture and beyond. At first mistaken as a bad game, fans were surprised to find something unique.

The game is deceptively weird. While its surface, particularly the concept and visuals, seem to create its strangeness and ambiguity, the actual weird resides in its deconstruction of the dating-sim genre. In this close-reading, I analyze the unusual storytelling, structure and mechanics of this bizarre parody game and explore the tropes and conventions of Japanese popular culture which are subverted to determine this a strange dating-sim.



Figure 1. The opening menu of Hatoful Boyfriend frames it as cute and romantic through pink hearts.

Hatoful Boyfriend

Hatoful Boyfriend (Hātofuru Kareshi) is an “otome visual novel”, more specifically a dating-sim catered to girls, created by Hato Moa. Instead of featuring human or anthropomorphic anime characters, it stars pigeons. When these characters are introduced, however, they are accompanied with a personification of design. The creator first came up with the concept for Hatoful Boyfriend as a 2011 April Fools’ Day joke and launched a pilot as a Flash game. Following its immense popularity, the creator finalized the game at October 30, 2011 in the engine FamousWriter. The title of the game plays with the words “heartful” (or “hurtful”) in English and hato which means pigeon or dove. An English-translation patch was released after a translator, Nazarine, was hired by the creator.

In Heartful Boyfriend, the protagonist is a cave girl who attends the all-pigeon academy, St. Pigeonations, “by pigeons, for pigeons”. The girl, whose default name is Hiyoko Tosaka, feels privileged

to attend the school and explains that it is “the world’s, greatest gathering-place for gifted birds”. The narrative of the game depends on the romance that the player pursues with different love interests branching the narrative. By romancing one of the characters – by taking him to a festival, providing gifts, and standing up for him during key moments – the player can follow a specific plot line and connect with one of the birds. Some of the romances and their outcomes also depend on how the player increased her skills which are divided in “wisdom”, “vitality” and “charm”. The plot lines reveal particular backgrounds, problems or secrets of the birds that can be amusing and even emotional or shocking.

The characters that you can date include Ryouta Kawara, a grey pigeon that you have known since childhood (see figure 2); Kazuaki Nanaki, a white dove and your sleepy math teacher; Iwamine Shuu, a partridge and extremely creepy doctor; Nagaki Fujishiro; a shy boy in the library; Oko-san, your pudding-obsessed coach; Sakuya Le Bel Shirogane, a white quill and an aristocratic transfer student; Yuuya Sakazaki, the charming half-brother of Sakuya. Interspecies romance aside, the game is a highly unusual, one constructed around an obscure story world. As the cave girl motif suggests, mankind appears to have regressed in its civilization. This is also supported by key moments in the game. When you go for a run, for instance, images of a destroyed town appear. During the romances, it becomes clear that the relationship between humans and birds is a complicated one. The plot lines of Shuu and Yuuya explain that among birds, there are different political factions. The school is embedded in this political conflict, as Yuuya explains:

The Dove Party believes we should live peacefully with the remaining humans, while the Hawk Party believes we should exterminate them to make room for birds. St. Pigeonation’s is actually a secret experimental institute created by the Hawks

When the player has completed these different dating routes, a new route can be unlocked – the Hurtful Boyfriend route – which explains

the background story. The world of *Hatoful Boyfriend* is described as post-apocalyptic, devastated by a war between birds and humans. The cause of this war was the lethal bird flu H1N5 that humans tried to counter with another virus. Though their purpose was to wipe out the birds, the virus had unusual side effects. Pigeons became intelligent and started to fight back, leading to a war that lasted for nearly forty years. As a result, birds became the dominant species on earth. This story line also describes the death of Hiyoko's parents due to a political incident. As members of the Human Liberation Front, struggling for more freedom for humans, they took control of a bird orphanage, which escalated. Apparently, Hiyoko was put in *St. Pigeonation's* as a human representative to see if humans and birds could again form meaningful bonds together. I will detail this highly unusual storyline further below.

Though my primary focus is *Hatoful Boyfriend*, I should note that the franchise is not limited to the game alone. A larger narrative is told across different media platforms and games. This process has also been described as “transmedia storytelling” by Henry Jenkins, a term which was increasingly popularized amongst academics and marketers alike (Jenkins, 2003, 2006). A sequel to the original game, *Hatoful Boyfriend: Holiday Star* (2012) was released with a Christmas theme as well as three drama CDs in which voice actors perform the pigeon characters. The designer, Hato Mao, also produced a manga with four-panel gag comics (“yonkoma”) and short stories.

Though none of these products are necessary to make sense of the game, they do deepen the background of the characters and reveal aspects of the story world. While the initial game can be consumed autonomously, it is linked quite directly to other media texts. For instance, at a certain point the character Yuuya recommends a blog (<http://pigeonblog.wordpress.com/>) on pigeon life style, written by the critically acclaimed author Brian Pigeon. The player is asked to visit this WordPress and explore the world of doves through the eyes of Brian, an urban blogger in London, and of the first intelligent

pigeons. By presenting this blog and its author as real, Hatoful Boyfriend attempts to break the fourth-wall of its fiction.

The game particularly fits in a tradition of contemporary Japanese popular culture. In this type of storytelling, characters remain rather flat and circulate across media as specific tropes. Hiroko Azuma (2009) even argued that Japanese popular culture operates as a database, where specific tropes occur again and again. Cat girls and shy men with glasses are but two examples of such fan-favorite tropes, or “moe” in Japanese, that manifest over and over again. Hatoful Boyfriend rewards the player with knowledge of particular tropes of Japanese culture. Sakuya, for instance, is distant at first but slowly grows romantically attached to the main character – a trope that is often described as “tsundere”. The player who is versed in the genre of dating-sims will recognize many stylistic features in Hatoful Boyfriend, but rearranged into something new and utterly bizarre.

Hatoful Boyfriend might seem like a parody. At first sight, it spoofs dating-sims and indulges in overly dramatic plotting at points. Nonetheless, the intent seems to be genuine and heartfelt. Depending on the characters that you choose the date, the themes may shift completely from slice-of-life, to detective drama, to murder plots. In the extended version, the new character Anghel even changes the entire setting to a turn-based role-playing game that sports epic music. Hatoful Boyfriend appeals to the knowledgeable gamer through these tropes and genre spoofs.

While the game may sound silly, it is highly engaging. As you gradually get to know the different characters and their stories, you see them less as pigeons and more as individuals. Though some of the romances are pure comedy – like dating the pudding obsessed Okosan who wants to turn the whole world into jelly – its ambiguity often makes for interesting and dark game play. As you progress, the world itself becomes less bizarre and more tragic. Hatoful Boyfriend may take conventional dating games and Japanese character tropes as its starting point, but ultimately it aspires to create a holistic story world of its own – a mixture of the cute and the dark.



Figure 2. The player can date his childhood friend Ryouta and further understand his background story.

Weird Cuteness

Aesthetically, the style of the game relies heavily on cuteness. The different design choices – the wings behind the date, the swirls in the text box (see figure 2) – frame it in the genre of dating games. The menu (see figure 1) already echoes the soft and sweet style of otome visual novels and shoujo fiction in general with conventional symbols such as sparkly glitter and hearts. The logo reflects this as well through its pink and purple color scheme, with a flying heart in the background. Even the line under “Hatoful” is underscored with a fleur-de-lis symbol.

These “kawaii” or cute motives are also present in the game itself. Instead of sprites, or even drawings of pets, the player sees actual pictures of pets. This might seem hilarious and camp. In Japan, though, such pet photographs are perceived as cute and therefore have

a distinct connotation. The combination of art and photography of pets is not a strange thing. At Comiket, as I observed in 2012, there is an entire sub-genre of self-published comics or “doujinshi” in this style created by owners about their pets. These semi-biographical works may feature short comics, pictures of cats that have been doodled on, or little diaries of the adventures of their rabbits. In other words, when Western people see *Hatoful Boyfriend*, they might be confused by this mixed media approach. This type of fiction is not unconventional in the strategies of Japanese media mix (Ito, 2005). Moreover, the pigeons are naturalized already during their introduction. Next to their photograph, the player sees an anthropomorphic interpretation of them as pretty boys or “bishounen” (see figure 3). Only *Oko-san* is not that intelligent and therefore represented by a pigeon image rather than a bishounen.

Hatoful Boyfriend presses us to decode the birds as human but also plays at their appearance and life style as birds. When you hear that an egg got crushed, or that pigeons do not live long, you suddenly become aware of their birdness again. This creates an uncanny story at points, as the desire to anthropomorphize these characters often hides their animal features.

This cuteness, then, may also be unsettling. When analyzing the aesthetics of cuteness, Sianne Ngai (2005) says that this is exactly the point. Cute is a style of exaggeration and parody. It is often a way to translate eerie and dark feelings that are partly masked, but by masking them, these features become even more overt. The *kawaii* style – bright and big eyes, colorful hairdos, detailed faces – fits in these aesthetics quite clearly, but these visuals often provide a ground for darker motifs. This is also the case in *Hatoful Boyfriend*, which masquerades as a cute and deviant dating game at first sight, but quickly becomes something else entirely.



Figure 3. The characters are introduced in their pigeon form and as bishounen

From Adorable to Eerie Interaction

The outcomes of the different romances in *Hatoful Boyfriend* range from comical to romantic to extremely dark. Romancing Oko-san, for instance, ends in a quest for the both of you to obtain the fabled, seven-colored pudding. The other romances are less humorous and often have a sad twist. Sakuya, for instance, slowly reveals how his father, a nobleman, constantly pressures him into becoming head of the family, while Sakuya actually aspires to become a musician. You can support him in his musical career. The mood of this romance is captured in this quote: “I don’t know if his father will accept him, or if he really will run away. But, I know he will come back to me and I pray that our future will be a happy one.” If you obtained the good ending, Sakuya becomes a successful musician but a casual reference is made that Sakuya is not who he thinks that he is. Dating your math teacher, Nanazaki, leads to a situation in which you eventually find a photograph of a person he loved, defaced by a marker. These plot

twists are all important for the end game Hurtful Boyfriend in which these points are connected.

To romance the characters, the player has to stand up for them during key moments. These moments often reveal something of the real plot line that is going on behind the scenes. You find an ID tag of a lost student; you hear the rumors that students are turned into food; you note the obscure files in the infirmary. In these cases, it is up to you how you deal with the situation and depending on who you are romancing, you may need to make a specific choice. If, for example, you see Doctor Shuu walking around at midnight, it is often best not to pay him close attention, unless you want to provoke him.

One of the more melancholic romances is shared with Nageki. As you slowly spend time with him in the library, he opens up to you, and you suspect he is being bullied. When he tries to get out of the library, eventually, it turns out that an invisible wall blocks him. Nageki turns out to be a ghost who committed suicide a long time ago. "I killed myself in this room. And so here I stay," Nageki remarks sadly, but you can help him let go.

The darkest romance, perhaps not surprisingly, is with the scientist Shuu Iwamine. As the partridge becomes more fond of you, you realize that he is quite twisted. In this romance, the player needs to be choose between the doctor and Yuuya, who is trailing Shuu as a Dove Party agent. Choosing Shuu also means that you often stumble into him in the park at midnight or around the school property as he admits disposing of things he "no longer needs". At the festival, you bump into Shuu again near the incinerator. A day later, Yuuya is missing and you are asked to replace him. "My heart's racing but I can't tell if it's love or fear for my life!" The romance turns bad pretty quickly around Christmas when you get a special present: a real white bird feather that, you gleefully note, "looks pricey" and a roast that you eat happily.

On Valentine's Day, you notice that there is something amiss at the infirmary. "At the foot of the bed sits a washbasin, its liquid pink,

with a stack of scissors coated in blood and feathers in the bottom. The blood on the bed is still wet.” Shuu tells you: “I just finished dismembering another student, and hadn’t cleaned up yet. Please, pay it no mind.” He finally asks you how Yuuya’s carcass tasted. “I was afraid he’d be a little tough.” You realize that the roast that he sent you for Christmas was Yuuya’s body. Shuu tells you that he only enjoys his research and does not want any trouble. He highly respects you. “Just cutting you up would be a terrible pity... and I think I want to keep you by my side. Forever. I shall preserve only your head. I will make sure I study your insides most...intimately.”

The final scene depicts Shuu on the run for the Hawk Agents, since he apparently upset his own fraction by preserving your head. As he runs through the park with your decapitated head, Shuu admits: “I think perhaps I have felt new emotions, since I acquired you.” In a highly disturbing moment, Shuu asks you if you loved him. You can choose out of three options, but all of them say “yes”. This option, in which the control is actively taken from the player, gives a meaningful and eerie touch to this mad romance.



Figure 4. The player can only confess his love to Shuu

Darkening the Dating-Sim

After dating the pigeons, the player can open a new game which offers the option to “fulfill an old promise”, which unlocks Hurtful Boyfriend. At this point, the protagonist changes to Ryouta, after you have played with Hiyoko for several months. After a fade-to-black, a new day starts and the pigeons remark Hiyoko’s absence. Kazuaki lectures the birds on the long-lasting conflicts between humans and pigeons, started by the virus that was supposed to exterminate all pigeons but instead gave them intelligence. When Ryouta goes to a file cabinet, he discovers a box covered with blood: “The eyes are glassy. But even like this, I still recognize her. She wasn’t late. She was here all along.” The player-character Hiyoko has died and it is up to Ryouta to solve this case.

The protagonist and perspective shift along with the genre. The player is served with a visual novel in which romancing is no longer the

key mechanic, instead, solving the murder mystery is. As the route starts, a minimalist “1st class” image is shown (see figure 5) that can be sharply contrast to the cute introductions of the 2nd and 3rd term (see figure 6). The image depicts a broken egg, symbolizing the death of the protagonist but also incorporating some of the key aspects of the game, such as the struggle between the birds and mankind. This image frames the game as a kind of paratext (Genette, 1997), supporting its shift in genre and dramatic motifs. *Hurtful Boyfriend* is the dark deconstruction of a seemingly cute, whimsical dating game.





Figure 5 & 6. Framing narrative time in *Hurtful and Heartful*.

During the first class, everyone is evacuated to the gym and the birds are confused. The death of Hiyoko leads to many rumors and no one exactly knows why they have to remain in the gym. Ryouta narrates:

From the snatches of conversation I hear, it sounds like all the print boxes had pieces of a human corpse in them. Were they all pieces of Hiyoko, I wondered? Nobirdie seems particularly concerned. Which isn't all that odd: it was grotesque, but it's not like it was a dead bird. Just some primate...

The internal monologues of Ryouta, now a detective, not only echo the sentiments of noir in terms of language, but also in the visual style of the game. While *Heartful* frequently showed us level backgrounds or sparkles during Hiyoko's interior monologues, *Hurtful* provides an empty background (see figure 7). A minimalist design is chosen with a pure black background, without any dove images or kitsch. These

grim intermezzos befit the fate of our protagonist and the mood of the game, which has suddenly shifted.

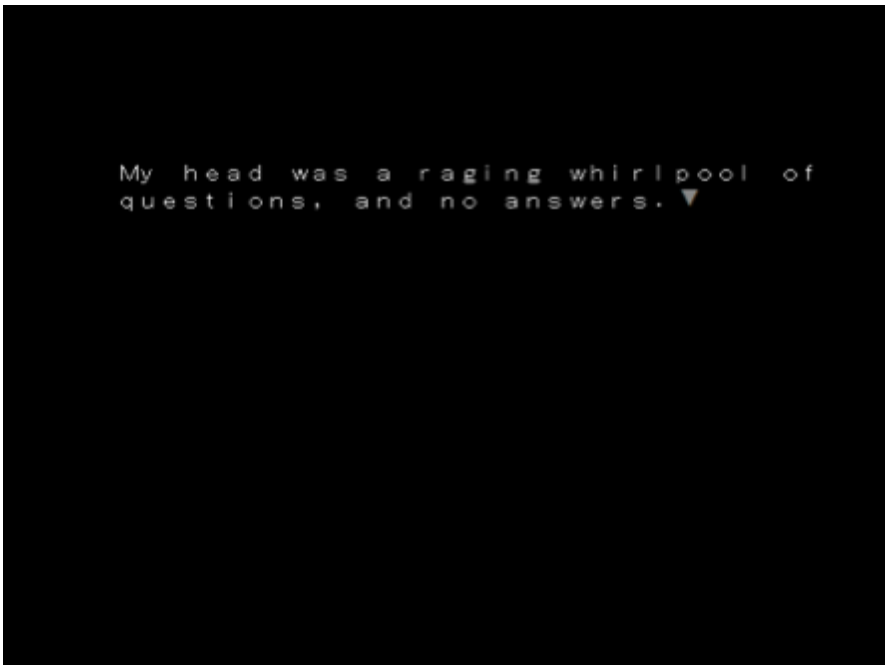


Figure 7. The new player-character, Ryouta, has interior monologues that closely resemble detective fiction.

The plot thickens when the pigeons find out that an enormous dome now surrounds the school property. Sakuya asks: “Is this really a shelter...? Is there really a natural disaster?” Ryouta and Sakuya want to know what happened to Hiyoko and escape the gym after the headmaster delivers a speech. In the classroom, they find out that Hiyoko’s remains have disappeared from the box. Yuuya tells the others not to worry – this is not a crime novel. “Corpses don’t disappear, and we won’t be having a famous detective show up and find the culprit for us.” Even in these grim hours, the game still delivers self-reflexive puns. As it turns out, Shuu has brought Hiyoko’s remains to the infirmary for an autopsy. The birds visit the janitor of the school, called One, who provides a clue by explaining that Ryouta has forgotten something. They also find out that Hiyoko

was likely poisoned because she was the “Human Representative”, who had been assigned to the school for a reason.

Apparently, the birds discover, a deal was made between the humans and birds that if anything were to happen to the Human Representative, this would be the ultimate proof that birds and humans cannot coexist. As a result, the facility would close down and humans would get several hours to arm themselves and take their revenge. “I rather think,” Sakuya speculates, “that this whole thing was arranged to widen the divide between humans and birds from the start”. As the crime plot progresses, the birds are stalked by a mysterious human figure who resembles a scarecrow.

This dark finale holds several twists for the player. Many of these revolve around the identities of the birds, who are not who they claim to be or have done dark deeds in their past. The most relevant plot lines for this article, and the interpretation of the game, revolve around the death of Hiyoko and Nageki, and the shared background stories between Ryouta and Hiyoko. Nageki was apparently in a bird orphanage that was attacked by humans. A brother of his, Hitori, and him survive and room together, but Nageki is in bad shape. He receives a special invitation to St. Pigeonations, where they can help him with his illness. Here, he unknowingly becomes part of an experiment with the highly lethal Charon virus.

A human would be brought to me. They would struggle, and gasp. And then, with a last, painful sigh, they would stop moving. I knew why I was brought here. Living in my body was a virus deadly to humans in a matter of minutes.

Upset by the results of the virus, Nageki commits suicide. After many trials, the protagonists get rid of scarecrow with a taser, and are captured by Shuu. In a villainous monologue, he explains that he had preserved Nageki’s remains and transplanted them in Ryouta, who he describes as an “exemplary student”. Ryouta had been undergoing treatment by the doctor for a while, but apparently this was to weaken

him and make him susceptible to the virus. Ryouta realizes what he had suppressed: Hiyoko died by the Charon virus that resided in him.

In this dark finale, Shuu reveals that the scarecrow is a special experiment of his to construct a new human. Though the Hawk Faction found this experiment unethical, Shuu has persisted. The scarecrow is actually Hiyoko, whose brain he had carefully preserved. He applauds Ryouta for tasing the scarecrow that had haunted them: “Yesterday her body and today her mind, you’re a far better villain than I could ever hope to be, mister Kawara”.

The cute, romantic tropes of the dating-sim is now truly subverted. The representation of the scarecrow gains another meaning: a ghostly presence of the previous player-character. Hiyoko still haunts us; “you” are still in the game. This haunting of the birds hints at a dark romance; a deconstruction of the dating-sim altogether. The scarecrow, who speaks in a language that we cannot understand, is the girl that we were once attached to. The Human Representative had the purpose to form an intimate connection with birds, but now she evokes anxiety. She has become a dark figure, stalking the new player-character. Her murder is the ultimate narrative ploy. It is in these moments that Hatoful Boyfriend is a truly strange and subversive dating-sim.

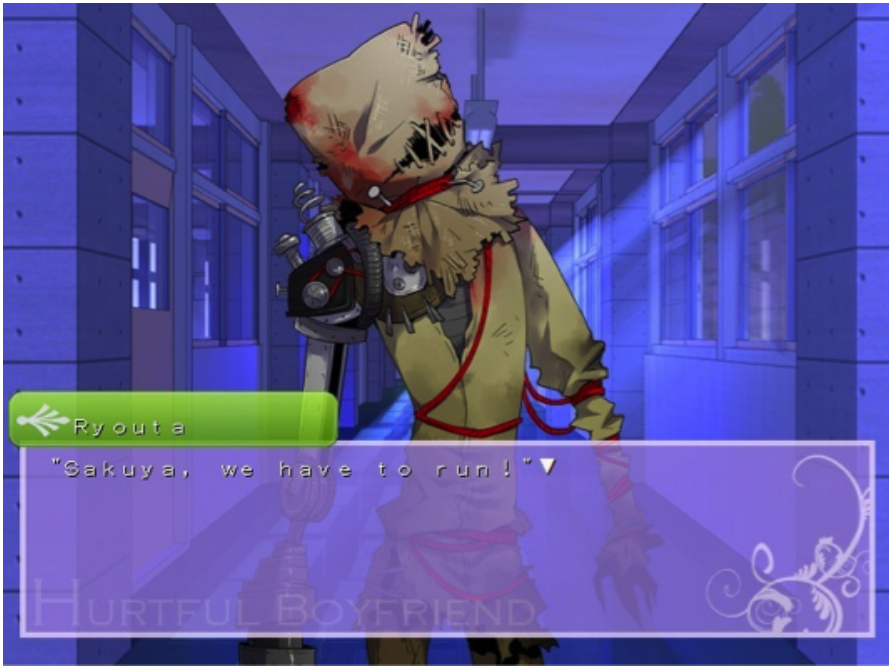


Figure 8. The first player-character, Hiyoko, haunts the game as Scarecrow.

Conclusion

When buying Hatoful Boyfriend, or viewing some of its imagery, one would expect a game filled with humour. Puns like “everybirdy”, conventional glitters and rose petals steer towards an interpretation of the game as an otome dating-sim, or perhaps a cheap parody of it. The initial plot of the game also supports such an interpretation, including the dramatic backgrounds of the characters. However, it is within the small secrets and hints that the game suddenly unfolds itself as dark and clever. The storyline of Shuu and Nageki already show the ambiguity of the game, and its clever interaction design that often denies the player agency.

It is also not the only parody of dating sims in its kind. The browser game Jurassic Heart (2013), for instance, begins when you shop for a ukulele with your best friend and potential love interest Taira, a tyrannosaurus rex. Other than interspecies romance, recent games

have also explored gourmet. The Bacon Lettuce Biographies (2013) is a school-based boy's love story in which you date pieces of meat, while the suitors in Love! Sushi Rangers (2014) are sushi, presented as pretty boys. The additional Hurtful Boyfriend route, however, really stands out. Within this story, the dating-sim genre is completely deconstructed. The game can no longer be interpreted through its outward cuteness and eccentricity. It has become something else entirely as the player is sucked into the sadistic and post-apocalyptic universe of Hatoful Boyfriend. This title is not just whimsical, but allows for clever and self-reflexive play. This seemingly weird inter-species dating-sim is actually a rich visual novel, rife with interesting characters and meaning. It is not afraid to make risky choices in its design and storytelling. If this is weirdness, then I hope that other games can take a tack from it.

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