

Hatoful Boyfriend

by Julian "rabbit" Murdoch



I'm not entirely sure Hato Moa exists. I've spent months exchanging enormously pleasant and charming emails with her about the thing she is most famous for, the "pigeon dating simulator" known as Hatoful Boyfriend. I'm left with the portrait of a 30 year old woman living in Japan who briefly attended law school, but has since made a living drawing manga for French Publisher Les Humanoïdes Associées. She loves birds, living with a fantail pigeon named Okosan. She did a reasonably popular manga series called "Vairocana" that started in 2007.

And then, supposedly, there was an April Fools joke about a pigeon dating simulator called Hatoful Boyfriend in 2011. I say supposedly, because I can't find any evidence of the «joke» part. Four months later, in July, the actual game was released. Since then, Hatoful Boyfriend has spawned a sequel, a radio-play, a manga of its own, and merchandise. All of this has, by Moa's account, let her save up enough to work on whatever projects she likes.

And what exactly is Hatoful Boyfriend? On the surface, it's just insanity. The Visual Novel is a foreign concept to most western game audiences. More interactive fiction than anything else, a traditional Visual Novel narrates an often melodramatic tale with static images and only the occasional decision, generally in the form of dialog choices. The most successful versions of these kinds of games in the west have been the Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney series,



Above: Ace Attorney a popular visual novel
Left: Okosan a love interest in Hatoful Boyfriend but even they have more gameplay elements than true, near-static Visual Novels.

The sub-genre that Hatoful Boyfriend falls into Otome is even more rarefied. Translated literally as "young lady," Otome games are straight-up romance-simulators, where the goal is always some version of true love. And while Moa considers herself a gamer, she doesn't play Otome. "I love Phoenix Wright series, and JRPGs," she says. "But Visual Novels are easier to create than other games for amateurs. I prefer writing stories to drawing, but I like and need visuals for stories because I've spent so much time with manga in my life." Which is all well and good. Except, you know... Pigeons.

"Most people who read Hatoful articles just say 'ridiculous! crazy!'" admits Moa. She insists, however, that the legion of fans who have played the games get beyond that. "I wanted to create something that seems ridiculous and crazy at first glance, but that once you look into the world, you would fall into the depth," she says.



That depth is definitely there. Here's the thing about Hatoful Boyfriend: The well here is very, very deep, and the bottom of the well can be very, very dark. I've played hours and hours of it. In each pass through the game, perhaps only 20 or 30 actual decisions are made, but the stories that unwind are elaborate and incredibly complex. They can be ridiculous:(bird) jocks with pudding obsessions feature prominently. There are happy romantic endings. There are heartbreaking sad endings. There are creepy, incomprehensible and genuinely scary endings. Repeated playthroughs change the whole dynamic of the game, putting you into different character roles, and taking the whole thing from goofball to quite sinister.

Moa, it turns out, isn't just a storyteller, she's actually a good storyteller. Her chosen canvas just happens to be birds. And the birds aren't really even a joke. When pressed about the birds, she falls back onto a simple answer.

"I just love birds, since when I was a child. Three fantail pigeons are living with me now." As intriguing as I found the game, however, I never got over the sense that I was trespassing on some alien ground. The more I talk to Moa, the more I'm convinced that there's a cultural gap that perhaps, as a westerner, I just won't be able to bridge, no matter how much I try to remember my college professors' screeds about postmodern

cultural relativism. After probing her with questions about the Japanese attitude towards relationships and sex, she deflects to suggest that it's centuries of Otaku culture that make the gap so wide.

"This is just another otaku culture, like anime or manga," she explains. "A famous female writer in 11th century Japan fell in love with a character in the Tale of Genji, a classic of romance literature. You can find so many good samples in Edo period (1603 to 1867). Seeing Ukiyo-e, Kabuki and Yokai pictures, you can find a cornerstone of Otaku cultures." To suggest that this note from Moa began a rabbit hole in my exploration of the themes present in Hatoful Boyfriend would be an understatement of titanic proportions. The

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Above: A woodblock print from 1852 featuring a scene from The Tale of Genji from Japan's National Diet Library

Left: Okosan's "human form" in game.

Tale of Genji, it turns out, is the Japanese equivalent of the entire Shakespeare canon mashed up with War and Peace, rolled into a single tale and spanning over 1,000 pages. It's deep in court politics, Buddhism and romance, as it follows the entire life of a young Japanese Prince, Hikaru Genji. When asked for more details about who she is, where she is, and for a picture, she's coy. "I want audience to enjoy just works themselves, they don't have to know who made it too much." To which she attached a picture of Okosan, her fantail pigeon. Which, you have to admit, is kind of a conversation-ender. For all I really know, Moa Hato is a middle-aged white dudebro living in suburban Milwaukee. Or she's a 65 year old woman

from Tunisia. I know that Hato Moa is almost certainly not her real name, as Hato is the Japanese word for pigeon, Moa is an uncommon name, most likely taken from Moe, an anime slang word for a young girl. I'm not sure I really care.

Wherever, and whomever Hato Moa is, I wish her nothing but the best as she takes on whatever she chooses to mash up next.

The Tale of Genji was written early in the eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu and is considered the world's first novel.

