

Tomorrow's Nostalgia Today: Splatoon 3's Tentacular Metaxis

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INTRODUCTION

Splatoon 3 (Nintendo 2022) is a multiplayer 3rd person shooter where players control anthropomorphic squids and octopuses competing to cover as much of a given area as possible with colourful ink. The game positions these activities as games in “Inkling” and “Octoling” culture, alongside other leisure activities like collecting trading cards, following the latest fashion, and being a fan of celebrity musicians. Rather than framing this relationship between the player and the games played by their in-game self as a cynical postmodern and consumerist pastiche, this paper views these elements of the game – in particular its music scene – as representative of its engagement with a metamodernist and tentacular sensibility.

The music that plays in *Splatoon 3* is attributed to in-universe musicians such as “The Squid Sisters” and “Off the Hook”, with new releases coinciding with in-game and real-world events. This also takes the form of holographic concerts where Inkling pop stars perform alongside flesh and blood musicians in front of a live audience. These performances capacity for destabilising the boundary between multiple levels of narrative reality – or “metalepsis” (Hofer 2011, 232) – not only draws attention to the boundary between the virtual and the actual, but also draws attention to the relationship these virtual idols have with their *aura*. Walter Benjamin describes the aura as a unique embeddedness of an art object in the world that mechanically reproduced art (like cinema or photocopies) lacks (Benjamin 1969, 5). Clearly the virtual idol has no aura per-se, as the simulated nature of digital media forecloses the uniqueness that Benjamin ascribes to the concept, but their portrayal as idols certainly evokes it. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker call this fluctuation between cynical self-awareness and enthusiastic immersion “metamodernism” (2010), not as a rejection of poststructuralist analyses of late capitalism and postmodern culture, but rather as an acknowledgement that the connections between neoliberal market logic and the cultural factors described by scholars like Frederick Jameson (1984) or Mark Fisher (2014) are increasingly not observable in contemporary media.

The significance of art lacking an aura is its capacity to foster what Benjamin calls “absent minded” examination (1969, 19) and in so doing disrupt the reactionary attitude that he associates with the veneration of a single artist or work (1969, 14); and yet, virtual idols still enact the performance of an aura through limited and fixed events like concerts and single launches. Uncertainty itself can be seen in other virtual idols such as Hatsune Miku, whose “uncertain image” leads Jørgensen et al. to conclude that this is a form of neoliberal commandeering of the systems of desire

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formed by fan practices (2017, 239). Drawing from Nishitani Keiji, Vivian Sobchack argues that arguments that decentre the desire of the subject through the desire of a Lacanian Other – as Jørgensen et al. do – serve only to strengthen the subject as something that can be destabilised and therefore is in some sense stable (Sobchack 2004, 101). Even as it supposedly destabilises the subjectivity of consumers and fans, the idol’s aura is still reinforcing a form of desire that is “restricted to its twin poles of subject and object” (Sobchack 2004, 98). The uncertain and contradictory position one must take to hold these idols as both real and fake is what Vermeulen and van den Akker call “atopic metaxis” (2010) and is a position they associate with the state of contemporary culture.

In addition to the metamodern, contemporary media have also been described as tentacular (Fleming and Brown 2020), a term that easily latches on to the cephalopods of *Splatoon 3*. The *Splatoon* series itself reinforces this connection through its assemblage of multiplayer teams and equipment (Bianchi 2017) as well as its tentacular approach to curating the experience of players (Matovinovic 2024). The metaxis of the player’s position relative to their tentacular assemblage with the game and its world is mirrored in their position relative to its virtual pop stars but in a way that shifts attention from the player’s subjectivity to the construction of the world itself. Given the emphasis that is placed on multimedia franchise worlds to be immersive and internally consistent, the overt contradictions produced by *Splatoon 3*’s materialist and metamodern tentacularity position it as a noteworthy example of how to conceptualise these intertextual networks in a way that allows for a progressive creativity even within the gated community of a corporation like Nintendo. Despite being almost ten years old at time of writing, the *Splatoon* series is somewhat underexplored academically, but if the tentacular and the metamodern do prove to be useful tools for discussing contemporary culture, then perhaps this squid-shaped gap in the literature warrants additional exploration.

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BIO

Nikolas Matovinovic is an early career screen studies researcher working at The University of Melbourne in the school of Culture and Communication. His research focuses on the environmental humanities, new materialism, and popular genre fiction. His PhD research focused on questions of genre in the films of John Carpenter and his article "The Other Squid Game: How Splatoon 3 promotes a culture of cosiness, inclusivity, and becoming-cephalopod" will be published in *Games and Culture*.