

Tentacle to the Metal: Ecosophy, Metamodernism, and Splatoon 3

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Keywords

Metamodernism, Fantasy, Posthumanism, Virtual, Ecocriticism, Tentacular

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In September 2024 Nintendo's flagship 3rd person shooter *Splatoon 3* (Nintendo 2022) ran a 72-hour event called the "Grand Festival" which marked the end of its initial run of "splatfests", periodic in-game events that feature unique gameplay modes and new performances by diegetic pop idols. These performances exist as in-game events or as background music during gameplay in addition to paratexts like CDs, interviews, and concerts where animated characters appear as holograms in front of live musicians. Players' relationships to these virtual celebrities both as their "inkling"¹ avatars or as themselves are an important part of the series' construction of an online community that has gained a reputation for diversity and inclusivity. *Splatoon* is Nintendo's first franchise to be primarily designed around online play and the centrality of virtual idols to this community makes them a natural case study for how the series' cephalopodic² gameplay also influences its narrative texts and paratexts. This paper will study the virtual band "Off the Hook"³ comprised of Pearl (Rina Itou) and Marina (Alice Peralta) and how their relationship to both the world of the game and that of their voice actors is demonstrative of the series' ecologically focused design and metamodern sensibility.

Despite being one of only two major franchises released by Nintendo in the previous decade there are few games studies publications on the now decade-old series. This same decade has also seen the growing prominence of a body of academic literature concerned with the cephalopodic and "tentacular" in philosophy (Haraway 2016), screen studies (Fleming and Brown 2020), and neurodivergence-inclusive pedagogy (Tan 2024) which has naturally informed much of the extant literature on the series (Bianchi 2016; Matovinovic 2024). The term "ecosophy" refers to a methodologically inseparable study of culture and ecology as one interdependent system (Guattari 2000, 54) and this framework serves as a foundation for this paper's theoretical synthesis of tentacular metamodernism.

One can see the ecosophical connection between gameplay and biology in *Splatoon 3*'s adaptation of the cephalopod's ability to change colour and produce ink, as the ink that all weapons in the game produce is colour coded for each team. Current map control and previous skirmishes can be seen in the patterns of ink on the ground and

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

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when the player transforms into their more physically cephalopodic “swim form” they can move quickly across, up, or even through surfaces while replenishing their own health and ink. At the heart of this system is a principle of metaxy, or ontological in-betweenness, as it is the constant fluctuation between these forms that is the “true” form of the player-character; perhaps then, it is more fitting to say hearts of the system than heart, as cephalopods possess three each. This metaxy is also present in the figures of virtual idols like Off the Hook whose subjective position exists somewhere between the in-game characters, *Splatoon 3*’s diegetic music, virtual holograms in live concerts, and extensions of their voice actors’ star personas.

Marina and Pearl aren’t Peralta and Itou though, nor is their digitally modified singing reduceable to just their voices or a computer programme, instead it emerges from this tentacular metaxy itself. Metaxy lies at the root of “metamodernism” as coined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, a term that sidesteps debates around the chronology and taxonomy of the postmodern by reframing the discussion as one concerning a “structure of feeling” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). Vermeulen articulates a tendency in contemporary culture towards metaxy not as synthesis but as “a pendulum, swinging back and forth” (Vermeulen 2018, 258) and this affective unity in the face of apparent divergence scaffolds this paper’s theoretical framework and can be seen in the affective and aesthetic construction of the game itself. *Splatoon 3*’s eclectic Y2K-nostalgic design, emphasis on community, and participatory culture are all qualities that are associated with metamodernism in wider screen media discourses (Vermeulen and Wilkins 2024, 120). While there has been some recent scholarship on metamodernist games studies (Radchenko 2025) the field is still nascent, with even Vermeulen and Kim Wilkins commenting on the “surprising” lack of “new media” scholarship on the term (2024, 120).

This paper’s analysis of Off the Hook’s tentacular metamodernism demonstrates the connection between these two lines of thought that developed in parallel over the 2010s, alongside the development and maturation of the *Splatoon* series itself. That cephalopod tentacles themselves store three fifths of their “brain” makes these grasping appendages literal “lines of thought” in their own right. There is a metaphorical and physiological connection between these ideas just as there is between an octopus prying open a clam and the frenzied digital enfolding of a controller during gameplay. This paper aims to demonstrate this connection and express its relevance to broader debates in contemporary cultural studies.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Players are represented by anthropomorphic cephalopods called "Inklings" and "Octolings" that transition between humanoid and teuthoid or octopoid forms at will.
- 2 Cephalopods are the class of molluscs that contain cuttlefish, nautili, octopuses, and squid
- 3 the song Tentacle to the Metal is credited to "Damp Socks feat. Off the Hook", which is itself demonstrative of the narrative complexity of the *Splatoon 3*'s music scene.