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## Inklings and Tentacled Things: Grasping at Kinship through Video Games

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### Abstract

Connecting Haraway's recent observations about "making kin" to video games, this essay examines how particular elements of the medium might cultivate nuanced considerations for multispecies relations. To fully grasp how video games broadly redefine relations between human and nonhuman animals, we must consider the role of game aesthetics and play mechanics in players' experiences of becoming-with. These elements of games fundamentally shape players' engagements with the medium and are inextricably linked to their storytelling and production. Moreover, game aesthetics and play mechanics (in conjunction with storytelling) demand that players take specific actions and inhabit distinct roles during play, enabling players to not only think alternative kinships, but also *enact* making them. To demonstrate these points, I examine the aesthetics and gameplay of two tentacular video games, analyzing how they offer rhetorical models for productively thinking about humans' relations to nonhuman species. I primarily focus on games that heavily feature cephalopod creatures because this specific animal class is often viewed as a rich site for phenomenological and ontological investigations (including in Haraway's work). Thus, my research attends to specific video games and their tentacled characters to determine how they challenge players to entertain and enact alternative ontologies and human-animal relationships through play.

*Keywords:* Video games, play, digital rhetoric, ecocriticism, media studies, cephalopods.

### Resumen

Conectando las observaciones recientes de Haraway sobre "hacer parentesco" con los videojuegos, este ensayo examina cómo elementos particulares del medio pueden cultivar consideraciones matizadas para las relaciones multiespecies. Para comprender plenamente cómo los videojuegos redefinen ampliamente las relaciones entre los animales humanos y los animales no humanos, debemos considerar el papel de la estética del juego y la mecánica del juego en la experiencia de convertirse en jugador. Estos elementos de juegos fundamentalmente conforman los compromisos de los jugadores con el medio y están inextricablemente ligados a su narración y producción. Además, la estética del juego y la mecánica del juego (junto con la narración) exigen que los jugadores tomen acciones específicas y ocupen roles distintos durante el juego, permitiendo a los jugadores no sólo pensar en parentescos alternativao, sino también promulgarlos. Para demostrar estos puntos, examino la estética y la jugabilidad de dos videojuegos tentaculares, analizando cómo ofrecen modelos retóricos para pensar productivamente sobre las relaciones de los humanos con las especies no humanas. Me centro primordialmente en los juegos que caracterizan fuertemente a las criaturas cefalópodas, ya que esta clase específica de animales se ve a menudo como un sitio rico para investigaciones fenomenológicas y ontológicas (incluso en el trabajo de Haraway). Así, mi investigación atiende a videojuegos específicos y sus personajes con tentáculos para determinar cómo desafían a los jugadores a entretener y promulgar ontologías alternativas y relaciones entre humanos y animales a través del juego.

*Palabras clave:* Videojuegos, juego, retórica digital, ecocrítica, estudios de medios, cefalópodos.

Tentacles mean trouble. This is a lesson learned by many video game players in digital worlds populated by cephalopod-like creatures. Tentacles are often synonymous with gameplay mechanics that threaten to ensnare, crush, sting, poison, or destroy players' avatars, making foes of soft-bodied mollusks. Across a wide range of game genres, tentacled species appear as non-player characters (NPCs) that attempt to thwart players' efforts. Squids, such as the baleful bloopers of Nintendo's *Mario* franchise, often appear as minor enemies that remain largely innocuous until a brush with their bodies harms, if not kills, the game's protagonist. Cephalopodic characters are also presented as nefarious endgame bosses, such as the heinous Old Gods of Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*, whose tremendous tentacled-bodies require an entire party of player-characters to subdue. Juxtaposed against conventional humanoid avatars, these cephalopod NPCs and their writhing, reaching limbs largely function as ripe metaphors for unbridled power, unfettered greed, and uncivilized otherness that threaten to choke from existence all that is "good" and "human."

There are, however, instances where troublesome tentacles act as bridges rather than binds between humans and cephalopods. Consider, for example, *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (2014), an independently developed adventure game by Young Horses.<sup>1</sup> Players enter the video game during the protagonist's wedding where Octodad, an octopus masquerading as a man, dons his attire before uniting with his human bride at the altar. In a cramped dressing room within the chapel, the player is offered a brief tutorial for piloting this ungainly, orange octopus avatar. Players learn that to maintain his ruse, Octodad keeps two tentacles neatly curled around his face forming a shapely makeshift-mustache while his remaining six tentacles are distributed into the four limbs that a human might have—one for each arm and two for each leg. While Octodad appears human enough (at least in shape) and getting dressed seems relatively uncomplicated, playing through the first sequence of the game proves to be anything but simple. The controls that maneuver Octodad significantly differ from the traditional controls used to move human avatars in similar third-person adventure games. Each of Octodad's four "human" limbs must be moved *individually*, rather than all at once (as is typical for most humanoid avatars). Players must painstakingly lift and position each tentacle somewhat precisely to achieve a semblance of human-like locomotion throughout the game. The results are often comically disastrous with Octodad's limbs producing exaggerated gestures, stretching and swinging wildly, and occasionally defying the logics of real-world physics. As players direct Octodad's search for his wedding accoutrements, objects are hurtled across the chapel's various rooms and the tables are both literally and figuratively turned before he reaches the bride.

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<sup>1</sup> *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* is the sequel to Young Horses' *Octodad*, a freeware student project created at DePaul University and released by the developers in 2011.

In *Dadliest Catch*, tentacles trouble the conventions of anthroponormative play within the medium, challenging players to (re)think their understanding of both human and nonhuman animal experience. The game's story and aesthetics ally human players with the cephalopod protagonist through the avatar body rather than situating them on opposing sides of conflict. The uniquely mapped controls of the avatar itself dislocate players from a seemingly smooth experience of mediated play by explicitly defying normative methods of player control over their character. This dislocation draws attention to Octodad's imagined subjectivity, one that resists the anthropomorphic in its clumsy attempts at mimicry and asserts his animal and (game) machinic qualities. In a way, playing as Octodad offers a sort of speculative experience where players might ruminate on the philosophical problem of embodiment through Octodad's struggle to appear human even though he is in some sense always already human via the player's control. The game operates as a critique in which humans and their technology and culture are scrutinized and rendered strange, if not alienating, by the avatar's cephalopod perspective.

The play mechanics found in *Dadliest Catch* are relatively commonplace in today's video game market. Games such as *QWOP* (2008) and *Surgeon Simulator* (2013) also rely on avatar controls that are meant to estrange the player from their digital embodiment, though typically as a human character. What makes *Dadliest Catch* relatively unique is that the game offers an alternative model of human-cephalopod relations—or more broadly, human-animal relations—that strives to find common ground between creatures with very distinct physiologies and ecologies.<sup>2</sup> While Octodad bares little semblance to actual octopuses, the cumulative effect of the game's storytelling and play mechanics importantly challenge players' concepts of what is "human" and what is "octopus," moving against cut and dry definitions of these terms. Such an endeavor is especially important now more than ever as we face ecological crises in the Anthropocene. As Donna Haraway points out, "It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems" (101), particularly if we are to find practical solutions for both human and nonhuman life. Haraway, like many ecocritical scholars, advocates for alternative methods of narrativizing humans' embeddedness in the global ecology to find viable means of addressing and recuperating from ecological devastation, such as climate change and mass extinctions. Her recent work acknowledges how some specific games produce the necessary stories and structures for effectively changing ecological thought and practices, citing string figures—some of the oldest games in human history—as well as the Iñupiaq video game called *Never Alone* (2014), or *Kisima Inñitchuᅇa* ("I am not alone"). Haraway explains that "Perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible" (23–24). Responding to Haraway's writings and voices in game studies scholarship, I

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<sup>2</sup> Another game that works similarly is *Goat Simulator* (2014) by Coffee Stain Studios. This third-person, open-world adventure game features a goat as its primary avatar, and its controls also defy anthroponormative conventions for the medium. See Bianchi's "Awkward Animal Avatars" for details.

examine how video games—a medium defined by stories and systems— broadly offer models for productively (re)thinking human relations to other species. I primarily look to games that heavily feature cephalopod creatures because this specific animal class is often viewed as a rich site for phenomenological and ontological investigation, including in Haraway’s own work.<sup>3</sup> Thus, my research attends to specific video games and their tentacled characters to determine how they challenge players to entertain and enact alternative ontologies and human-animal relations through play.

## Becoming and Becoming-with in Video Games

Recently, media scholars have adopted Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “becoming” to theorize how video games facilitate alternative understandings of human ontology. In *Mondo Nano*, Colin Milburn describes game avatars as both a metaphysical and technological concept akin to “becoming-molecular.” The avatar acts as “a rendering or incarnation of personal agency at the limits of materiality, at the nanoscale level of matter” (240)—a process that Milburn refers to as “nanomorphosis,” which allows players to (re)think themselves at the material level. Meanwhile, Souvik Mukherjee describes gameplay as an assemblage formed between human players and game machines. Building on Alexander Galloway’s descriptions of video games as action-oriented media, he argues that when in assemblage with game machines (through avatars, interfaces, etc.), players undergo becoming as they recognize how their actions do and do not act in accordance with the machine’s programming. Similarly, Colin Cremin claims that video games facilitate becoming when players identify themselves, their avatars, and the avatar’s algorithmic limitations as parts of an assemblage that enables play. These scholars attend primarily to the avatar—a structure specific to video game play—and how it allows players to explore alternative human-machine ontologies through game qualities that implicate the players’ sense of being.<sup>4</sup>

Theorizations of video games and becoming, however, primarily consider how becoming structures human players’ engagements with game machines. Relatively little scholarship in the field connects theories of gameplay and becoming to the cultural and historical trappings of games’ representations or seeks to understand how becoming in games might offer alternative models of humans’ entanglements in social and biological ecologies.<sup>5</sup> To address these points, my previous research unites theories of gamic becoming with the works of scholars such as Tom Tyler and others. Specifically, Tyler’s scholarship claims that video games can teach players to value nonhuman animal ontologies using design elements such as anti-environments and altercasting. Uniting

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<sup>3</sup> Melody Jue’s “Vampire Squid Media” (2014) offers some background on this as she examines the vampire squid in Vilém Flusser’s *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* and other works.

<sup>4</sup> Previous theorizations of the avatar and its relation to players’ concepts of identity and ontology draw on psychoanalytic frameworks, such as Bob Rehak’s “Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar” (2003), or on cognitive science, such as Andreas Gregersen and Torben Grodal’s “Embodiment and Interface” (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Debra Ferreday’s “Becoming deer: Nonhuman drag and online utopias” (2011) offers one example of this kind of scholarship.

Tyler's work with Mukherjee and Cremin's arguments, I demonstrate how video games might facilitate players' "becoming-animal" in ways that challenge anthroponormative perspectives.<sup>6</sup>

Notably, Haraway's ruminations on games in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* further complicate our understanding of how video games model alternative ontologies by examining how games facilitate "becoming-with." Haraway's concept of becoming-with is deeply tied to her notions of "making kin" and "the tentacular" in her writings. She offers these terms to help formulate a conceptual (re)worlding that challenges anthropocentric discourses and practices while responding to contemporary ecological crises. In contrast to becoming, becoming-with is a process that acknowledges alternative ontologies while also reinventing notions about kinship, or the relations between all life on Earth and their interwoven histories. Becoming-with defines members of a kinship through the material and semiotic properties that establish a connection between them (12–13). The process presupposes that there are no individual subjects or objects without reference to some form of established kinship and that such partnerships necessarily cultivate multispecies response-ability in the face of ecological trouble. Haraway defines "response-ability" as "collective knowing and doing, an ecology of practices" (34). The term refers to both our responsibility to the multispecies global community and to our ability to respond to problems affecting the global ecology.

Regarding games specifically, Haraway claims that the medium can offer alternative ontological models through players' becoming-with in (re)formulated kinships that might productively change ecological practices. She cites *Never Alone* (2014) as one example of how video games might simulate experiences that demonstrate human entanglement within larger ecological systems. Haraway describes this specific form of entanglement as the tentacular. She explains that

The tentacular are not disembodied figures; they are cnidarians, spiders, finery beings like humans and raccoons, squid, jellyfish, neural extravaganzas, fibrous entities, flagellated beings, myofibril braids, matted and felted microbial and fungal tangles, probing creepers, swelling roots reaching and climbing tendrilled ones. The tentacular are also nets and networks, IT critters, in and out of clouds. Tentacularity is about life lived along lines—and such a wealth of lines—not at points, not in spheres. (32)

Tentacularity, here, describes the processes of becoming-with and making kin in *Never Alone* that results from connecting animal species and technologies in complex systems during both gameplay and the game's production. Kinship in this independently developed, two-dimensional puzzle-platformer is forged not only between the Iñupiaq girl and fox avatars—their collaborative mechanics at once defining and uniting the two in their quest—but it is also found in their connections to the game's spirit helpers, algorithms, hardware, and players, uniting these components together in an intricate assemblage of becoming-with that finds and exacts a response to the detrimental global conditions outlined in the game's narrative. Moreover, Haraway notes, that the many

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<sup>6</sup> For an elaboration of this work, see Melissa Bianchi's "Claws and Controllers: Werewolves and Lycanthropy in Digital Games" (2016).

groups, including game designers, visual artists, indigenous storytellers, community activists, and so forth, who collaborated on the game's production are also deeply entangled in these kinship formations. For those involved with *Never Alone's* production, the game's technoculture fosters a response-ability toward troubling discourses about humans' relation to the environment and continuing indigenous cultural practices (86–89). Thus, the experience of *Never Alone* is tentacular, acknowledging the historical, cultural, and material contexts in which players, developers, animals, and machines are enmeshed.

While Haraway's reading of *Never Alone* demonstrates the value of video games for reimagining relations between humans and nonhumans in the face of ecological crisis, her analysis remains brief and narrowly focused on the game's narrative and production (understandable given the scope of *Staying with the Trouble*). To fully grasp how video games broadly redefine humans through kinship making, however, we must also consider the role of game aesthetics and play mechanics in the players' experience of becoming-with. As the game theorists previously discussed make clear, these elements of games fundamentally shape player engagements with the medium and are inextricably linked to their storytelling and production. Moreover, game aesthetics and play mechanics (in conjunction with storytelling) demand that players take specific actions and inhabit distinct roles during play, enabling players to not only think alternative kinships, but also *enact* making them. To demonstrate these points, I examine the aesthetics and gameplay of two tentacular video games. Though the design of each of these games vastly differs from *Never Alone*, both encourage players' becoming-with, fostering multispecies response-ability by challenging conventional understandings of human-animal relations.

### Who's Your Octodaddy?

As previously mentioned, gameplay in *Dadliest Catch* makes significant moves to challenge anthropocentrism and redefine the "human" category, in part, through the mechanics of its avatar. When playing the game, players control one or two of Octodad's tentacles at any time, switching between each with the press of a button. Octodad's tentacles can be used to grab and toss items in the game world; however, they are not designed to be intuitively controlled and often prove to be inexact in their motions. The constant need to switch between tentacles makes even simple tasks, such as lifting items and walking, time-consuming and trying endeavors. This is especially the case when compared to the movements of human avatars in highly popular game series, such as *The Elder Scrolls* or *Grand Theft Auto*, where compound actions (running, attacking, opening doors) are coded to individual inputs. Through Octodad, it becomes apparent how many games are specifically designed with human subjects in mind. As players struggle with the avatar controls to get Octodad dressed, complete household chores, and run errands, the game also suggests that society takes for granted that its subject is always already human. More specifically, its subject is a specific kind of human—one with four functional limbs—and this revelation challenges players to consider what it

might mean to acknowledge alternative ontologies in every day practice. Thus, the gameplay of *Dadliest Catch* encourages players to question anthropocentrism and what it means to be human both in and beyond game spaces.

Additionally, the challenges players face when directing the Octodad avatar to behave inconspicuously in the game's terrestrial environment facilitates the process of becoming-with an imagined nonhuman other. The character's overly fluid motions—tentacles slipping, sliding, and writhing past their targets—mark Octodad (and by proxy the player) with qualities that one would imagine an aquatic creature would have. This categorization is reified further during specific game moments where the player can direct Octodad to swim quickly through large, open tanks and long, narrow pipes using a single input for the game's controls. Becoming cephalopod in the game relies on players' performance of these actions at once understanding themselves as a part of and apart from Octodad's movements. From here, the gameplay creates a becoming-with through an enacted awkwardness shared between the Octodad character and players controlling him. Octodad's awkwardness stems from his position as an aquatic creature out of its element; meanwhile, the players' own awkwardness arises in moments where they cannot successfully make Octodad perform as a human despite their own humanness. Through this mechanism of play, *Dadliest Catch* inscribes upon the player the imagined subject position of an octopus thrust into a suburban human environment (in a sense, the worldview of a fish out of water), and in doing so, facilitates becoming-with.

The play mechanics of *Dadliest Catch* also drive the game's narrative, creating scenarios where player becoming-with enables human-cephalopod kinship. After the game's opening sequence featuring Octodad's wedding, the story picks up years later where Octodad and his wife, Scarlet, now have a home and two kids. Dressed in a business suit and tie, Octodad performs mundane tasks for his wife and children, Tommy and Stacy, who, at first, appear none the wiser to his deception. Octodad's household is reminiscent of iconic depictions of white America nuclear families from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Family relations are amicable and stable, while Octodad tends to the family's needs by grilling burgers, mowing the lawn, and buying groceries. There are, however, obvious quirks in the family's dynamics. Perhaps the most apparent of these is Octodad's inability to speak a human language. His audible responses to his family's inquiries are subtitled, bookended by asterisks, and described using expressive gestures, tonal adjectives, and indecipherable "blubs" or gurgles. Surprisingly, the family appears unperturbed by these factors, suggesting that language use—a skill often used to separate and elevate humans from nonhuman animals—should matter very little in drawing kinships between species. Likewise, most of Octodad's apparent cephalopod behaviors, especially his clumsy, player-directed movements remain uncommented upon. Scarlet, Tommy, and Stacy simply accept Octodad as family despite his difference (even when the truth about his existence is finally revealed) and with little concern for its obvious implications regarding sexual relations and paternity. And yet, Octodad's blissful home life remains under constant threat of the looming possibility that his nonhuman identity will be exposed either by his (players') inability to use his tentacles

to mimic human limbs or by Chef Fujimoto, the game's antagonist, who threatens to cook Octodad and tell his family his secret.

Overall, the outlandish premise of *Dadliest Catch* offers a reworlding where human-cephalopod kinship and the multispecies family are used to subvert human-animal hierarchies. The design of the main protagonist as an octopus deeply enmeshed within a human household encourages players to examine animals as kin from a perspective that challenges traditional relations between humans and animals in both domesticity and captivity. For example, Octodad's farce as a human father queers the normative roles thrust on animals living alongside humans, such as that of pets, service animals, and livestock.<sup>7</sup> His perspective of aquariums as "festering prisons of iniquity" challenges views that support animal captivity as a humane practice, while his conflicts with Chef Fujimoto critique the willful ignorance of nonhuman animal ontology that often justifies the consumption of animal flesh. Finally, as the family patriarch, Octodad is empowered in caring for his human kin, inverting hierarchies in the home that reify humans' power of care over captive and domestic nonhuman animals.<sup>8</sup> *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* also entertains the notion that the space of the home and the relations forged within it need not be limited to particular species (e.g. dogs, cats, certain species of fish, and so forth), suggesting that kinship making might offer a path to bridge the divides between wild and domestic animals as well as between green and blue ecologies.

Another aspect of *Octodad* that facilitates making kin, becoming-with, and response-ability is its multiplayer cooperative, or co-op, mode. In this version of the game, up to four players can play together, each controlling one of Octodad's four limbs. The cephalopod body as an avatar for four distinct players acts as an emblem of the group's tentacularity. Players become-with each other by simultaneously entering into assemblage with one another, the avatar, and the game machine in general through the collaborative acts necessary for piloting the avatar successfully. For example, one player might be responsible for directing a tentacle to flip a burger on the family grill, while two other players might coordinate the delivery of that burger to Stacy's plate simultaneously by controlling Octodad's footsteps. Co-op mode encourages players to work together—in part, acknowledging material, semiotic, and historical obstacles amongst themselves—as a means for finding response-ability in the games otherwise alienating environment.

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<sup>7</sup> I use "queers" here in-line with Mel Y. Chen's understanding of queer in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Chen does not "imagine *queer* or *queerness* to merely indicate embodied sexual contact among subjects identified as gay and lesbian" (104). Instead, Chen views these terms as "social and cultural formations of 'improper affiliation,' so that queerness might well describe an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of the heteronormative" (104).

<sup>8</sup> Here, I allude to Irus Braverman's *Zooland: The Institution of Captivity*, specifically her application of Michel Foucault's concept of pastoral power for understanding how caring for animals in captivity enacts humans' power over them.

## Squid-Kids and the Chthulucene

In contrast to *Dadliest Catch*—an independently developed and relatively short video game—Nintendo’s 2015 juggernaut hit, *Splatoon*, offers a rich model for how video games might facilitate making kin towards response-ability in the face of ecological crisis.<sup>9</sup> Released for Nintendo’s Wii U console, *Splatoon* is a post-apocalyptic, team-based, third-person shooter. The game’s narrative takes place on Earth several thousands of years into the future after mass extinctions caused by global warming have eradicated the majority of terrestrial animal life on the planet, including *homo sapiens*. The main characters of the game, called “Inklings,” resemble human children except for the long, large tentacles that protrude from their heads in place of hair. Despite their mostly humanoid appearance, Inklings are not direct descendants of humankind. Instead, these human-like squids are distant relatives of our contemporary cephalopods. Still, the narrative of *Splatoon* makes kin of humans and cephalopods by uniting our historical moment with speculative squid fiction in a way similar to Haraway’s invention of the “Chthulucene.”

Specifically, the game overtly links the dystopic epoch that the Inklings inhabit, called “The Mollusc Era,” to the Anthropocene. Likewise, Haraway’s Chthulucene narrative is a conceptual reworlding of the Anthropocene in response to our current ecological crises. Her new moniker for our current epoch of Earth’s history is meant to challenge anthropocentric discourses and practices while pushing for perspectives that acknowledge human embeddedness in complex ecologies and shared histories with nonhuman life. Haraway explains that the term, “Chthulucene,” resists links to Lovecraft’s Cthulhu monster in its spelling and is derived instead from rich mythologies of earth and animal goddesses as well as snake-haired monstresses and their beastly brethren, each of which “entangles the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus” (101).<sup>10</sup> These entanglements, she proposes, decenter “the human” from methods of thinking about material and historical relations between all life on the planet. Haraway’s Chthulucene also challenges narratives of the Anthropocene that situate human beings as the only species of portent shaping the planet and its future, supporting multispecies ecojustice. Finally, Haraway’s theorization of the Chthulucene urges readers to find and practice recuperative measures in the face of ecological issues affecting our global community rather than waiting for technofixes to emerge or settling on the planet’s inevitable destruction (3).

The story of the Mollusc Era in *Splatoon* performs a reworlding similar to Haraway’s Chthulucene in that “the human” is largely absent from the game’s narrative about cephalopods and their quest to find response-ability to their current energy crisis. The story takes place in the bustling city of Inkopolis where players engage in mock

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<sup>9</sup> *Splatoon* was released in May of 2015 and by the end of June 2015 the game had sold over 1.62 million copies internationally (Purchase). As of December 31, 2016, Nintendo reports that 4.76 million copies of *Splatoon* have been sold across the globe (Nintendo).

<sup>10</sup> Haraway’s list of inspirational figures for the Chthulucene, include: “Naga, Gaia, Tangora (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven A’akuluujjusi, and many many more” (101).

gunfights with paintball like weaponry. The city square of Inkopolis where players congregate and shop bears some resemblance to present-day Tokyo, Japan, and is filled with myriad digital displays, neon lights, and blaring music. Players learn that the city draws its electrical power from a single, nonrenewable energy source called the “Great Zapfish,” a rare type of bioelectric catfish. In single-player mode, players are tasked with retrieving the Great Zapfish after it is stolen by the Inklings’ nemeses, the octopus-like “Octarians.” Much of the game’s plot is teased out through single-player mode where players complete platformer stages and battle Octarian agents to find this precious resource. While the Great Zapfish itself might be a never-ending power supply, its removal from Inkopolis conjures parallels between the Inklings’ energy loss and humans’ depletion of organic, nonrenewable resources. Coupled with the game’s frequent allusions to human extinction as a direct result of energy crises and climate change, *Splatoon* suggests the possibility that Inklings are ill-fated to repeat the history of their primate antecedents if they and the Octarians cannot find a way to coexist (or perhaps find kinship) with one another.

In addition to supplanting humans in the Earth’s global ecology, Inklings and Octarians have evolved unique morphological and behavioral characteristics to fill the ecological niche left behind by their primate kin. In a brief text blurb, the game describes Inklings as follows: “The Terrifying Biology of the Inkling! Strength: Can leap up to 5 feet. Brain: Simple and predatory. Bones: None! Eyes: Can spot prey from 100 yds. away. Defense: High-pressure, high-capacity ink sack” (*Splatoon*). The Inklings and Octarians’ cartoonish appearances, however, confound these descriptors, largely because the game’s aesthetics are designed for younger audiences. The most apparent quality of both these cephalopod creatures, however, is their ability to shapeshift into both a cephalopod and a humanoid form. While shapeshifting avatars are not particularly new to video games, Inklings offer nuance to the trope as well as to the ways avatars make kin as discussed earlier in this essay. For example, like werewolves and other mythical figures appearing in horror and fantasy games, Inkling shapeshifting forges a kinship between different species through the hybrid animal body. In their humanoid form, Inklings have physiques like prepubescent human boys and girls. As squids, they appear wholly cartoonish with large round eyes, no mouth, and small, soft bodies. Uniting these forms in a hybrid body uniquely bridges the divide separating phyla and classes that are traditionally demarcated, both taxonomically and biologically, as evolutionarily distant from one another. Conceptually, Inkling shapeshifting reaches beyond the typical associations forged between human bodies and other mammals or vertebrates—those made based on physiological and psychological congruence—to identify cephalopods as “persons.” The transforming bodies in *Splatoon* are notably nonhuman in origin, which serves to decenter the human as the primary locus for forging new personhoods, building towards the Chthulucene.

As symbols for cephalopod-human kinship, Inkling avatars enable gameplay that challenges anthropocentrism. Mastery over the avatar’s squid and human forms is vital for players’ success. Inklings’ shapeshifting is a central mechanic to gameplay, and, in some ways, the process operates akin to the players’ exertions of control over both Nuna

and Fox in *Never Alone*. In both games, players navigate the digital world by switching between two visually and procedurally distinct avatars—one human (or humanlike) and one animal—each defined by the unique actions they offer players when navigating and affecting the digital world. In *Splatoon*, players initiate the process of shapeshifting by pressing and releasing the “ZL” trigger buttons on the Wii U controller. Inkling metamorphosis occurs nearly instantaneously with minimal graphical flourishes. The humanoid avatar shrinks into the shape of a squid when players press and hold the ZL button. The Inkling avatar returns to its humanoid form when the ZL button is released. In humanoid form, Inklings can run and jump as well as use myriad technologies to spray large quantities of their biologically produced ink on environment surfaces. In squid form, they can swim and dive in the inks that they have sprayed. Each morph has a specific purpose and context in which it is ideal to use. Though at times the human morph of the Inkling can dominate the majority of gameplay—a product of design that makes it the avatar’s “default” setting (that is, it does not require the press of a button to activate)—it is not the sole or preferred form for the entirety of the game itself. In this way, the transformation ability of the Inkling avatar attempts to question privileging the human figure as the ideal form of embodiment.

Inkling technologies reflect their users’ chimeric bodies in form and function, and this design choice emphasizes tentacularity as a component of gameplay. Inkling weapons are purchased in groups of three rather than as independent pieces. In battle, Inklings switch effortlessly between their main weapon (usually a spray gun or paint brush) and two sub-weapons (paint bombs, tracking devices, ink bazookas, etc.) with the press of buttons, complementing the fluidity with which they change shape. Weapons and the ink they produce serve several purposes, including producing paths for swimming, warding off enemies, and laying claim to territory (albeit temporarily as inks are erased after each match). Similarly, Inkling clothing fulfills many roles by acting as customizable fashion, bonuses to specific combat skills, and markers for team affiliation during major in-game competitions. The multiplicity of technologies and their uses in conjunction with the Inklings’ hybridity demonstrates the tentacular quality of *Splatoon’s* characters—their experiences are enmeshed in a rich ecology where it is difficult to discern kid from squid from tech.

This is especially true when considering the role of ink in the game as it bridges the boundaries between bodies and technologies. The ways Inklings might use ink in the game encourages players to imagine a posthuman ontology. In the game, ink is both a biological and technological product. The Inklings produce ink from their bodies and use their weaponry to adapt it as a tool for play, marking, and transportation. For players, this means understanding technology not as an extension or prostheses of the body, but as a vital organ of the body. Ink’s transience in the game parallels the ephemeral qualities of Inklings bodies—their changing shape and impermanent deaths. The inks shot, sprayed, splashed, and splattered across Inkopolis are not only traces of bodies, but they are also immersive environments *for* bodies. Inks are both mark and medium for the squid-kid. Here, technology becomes a vital point for establishing the posthuman tentacularity of the game’s narrative and gameplay.

The design of the hardware used to play *Splatoon* also fosters a tentacular experience of play by drawing overt attention to the player-machine assemblage. Specifically, the Wii U console (the only sanctioned hardware for playing *Splatoon*) distributes gameplay across several pieces of technology, including the television screen, the console box, and the Wii U gamepad—a technology that hybridizes a traditional game controller with a tablet and stylus. The Wii U gamepad relies on inputs that, ideally, would require players to grow an extra hand (or, perhaps, tentacle). Much like the awkward controls found in *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* that map player control counter-intuitively, the Wii U gamepad demands that players spread their visual and haptic attention across screens and forms of input. For example, players must constantly move their gaze from the television screen to the game pad on the tablet controller while simultaneously operating the Wii U's control sticks and buttons. Additionally, players might also tilt the tablet controller to change the in-game perspective or, in the heat of battle, use the stylus to move quickly across a battleground. While a few of these inputs have options for adjustment, the majority do not. These manipulations of the game's controls, however, might draw players' awareness to how their own material bodies—their eyes, hands, and head—move together with the Wii U's parts in assemblage. For example, consider the players who, in the heat of battle, replace their gamepad stylus with their index finger. In such moments, the player is simultaneously both body and technology enacting tentacularity by blurring the categorical distinction between organism and machine.

On the surface, competition appears to be the major theme of *Splatoon's* gameplay, but this way of engaging with the game is subverted by its emphasis on kinship and community. In online multiplayer matches, teams of three or four Inklings mock battle using specific parameters to claim territory or capture the flag. But even under the pressure of these competitive conditions, players practice making kin. In battle, color marks kin but only temporarily, and often strangers from across the globe find themselves banding together against randomly selected opponents under banners of all kinds of colors including neon purple, pink, orange, teal, green, or blue. Teamwork requires players to recognize how the Inklings' body and its technology work in assemblage with other Inkling avatars also under the direction of other players and game machines. This tentacular quality of gameplay is not unique to *Splatoon*. We might broadly apply this reading to most online multiplayer games that require team play and collaborative effort, assembling players and their game machines. What sets *Splatoon* apart is its focus on play and community as compared to other games that emphasize violence and antagonisms. According to the games narrative, Inklings battle against their own kind as a celebratory performance of their victory over the Octarians. Their matches are visually similar to the sport of paintball—a game—rather than the depictions of militaristic warfare found in most multiplayer team-based shooter series such as *Battlefield*, *Counter-Strike*, or *Gears of Wars*. Any sort of Inkling-on-Inkling violence in the game is enacted under the auspices of bonding over a shared history and is depicted without gore (in part, because the game is aimed at a young audience). Death is always impermanent and Inklings who may have been opponents one game can

become teammates in subsequent match-ups. Everyone who plays *Splatoon* is an Inkling, everyone is at once both friend and foe. Any lines drawn in ink are inevitably erased and redrawn with kinship remaining the common denominator.

### **Troubling Beyond the Tentacles**

By examining storytelling, game aesthetics, and gameplay in *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* and *Splatoon*, it becomes clear that these video games offer distinct models for (re)thinking the place of humans in both the medium and our global ecology. These tentacular video games encourage players to explore alternative ontologies and enact nontraditional human-animal kinships. Specifically, through play, players become part of the tentacular that connects the digital world and its representations to the material realities of the game system and the ecological moment of the Anthropocene. With these readings of *Dadliest Catch* and *Splatoon* in mind, we might look at other games or return to Haraway's reading of *Never Alone*, and consider what elements beyond storytelling and methods of production, such as avatar play, interface design, and hardware operations, contribute to the medium's modeling of making kin. We might also consider how the design of various hardware technologies (controllers, keyboards, mice, touchscreens, augmented and virtual reality interfaces) can be used to foster becoming-with that leads to player response-ability.

While the gameplay in *Dadliest Catch* and *Splatoon* model making kin in various ways, it is important to recognize that their representations only offer an inkling of what it might mean to make kin in the Cthulucene through video games. There are many possibilities given the diversity of games and there is also quite a bit of room for error considering the medium's complexity. For the most part, my readings of *Dadliest Catch* and *Splatoon* have been largely utopic, emphasizing how these artifacts effectively facilitate becoming-with. There are, however, qualities of both these video games that intentionally and unintentionally work against or subvert their attempt to make kin. I will briefly touch on some of these aspects here as they raise important questions for further investigation.

For example, the representation and gameplay of consumerism in both these videos games shortchanges the cultural and material implications of tentacularity, specifically with regards to labor and waste. Both the worlds of *Dadliest Catch* and *Splatoon* are designed to be overtly consumeristic spaces. In *Dadliest Catch*, the spaces of the home, the grocery store, and even the aquarium are lined with products and Octodad is often given instructions to use, retrieve, and buy these products. Meanwhile, Inkopolis is filled with multiple shops where players can spend in-game currency on objects for their Inkling avatar. Products for purchase appear and disappear with little consequence to the game environments. While the drive to consume pervades the spaces and mechanics of these games, there is little or no acknowledgement of the labor practices and waste production that might be associated with such consumerism. There is also no suggestion of how labor and waste related to consumerism affect the environments and creatures within these digital ecologies. Though the games may push against the notion

of “the human” in the Anthropocene, it is unclear that they challenge notions of consumption in the Capitalocene (another name and narrative for our current epoch that Haraway challenges through her Chthulucene) or gesture to these aspects of the medium itself—i.e. how the production and consumption of games impacts our global ecosystem.

Another element of *Dadliest Catch* and *Splatoon* that acts as an obstacle to becoming-with is the observation that the cephalopods in both games are only imaginings of what it might be like to be a soft-bodied mollusk. Many times, in both games, these representations significantly deviate from how real-world cephalopods behave because of their obvious fiction. It is all too easy for uncritical players to draw faulty connections—or none at all—between how they interact with simulated squid and how they might understand their relation to real-world cephalopods. Similarly, it is also possible to dismiss any connection the games might make to actual cephalopods because their content is ultimately a representation, fiction, or abstraction.

Despite these counterpoints, there is still value in teasing out how a video game might critically challenge anthroponormative views of species relations through play, specifically because games are tools we use to think. They are computational systems that, through models and simulation, allow us to explore and perform alternative possibilities. Determining how games allows us to think ourselves as other in identity and experience offers us another means by which we might find theories and narratives that account for the tentacular nature of life on our planet. In doing so, we might find new practices for cultivating responsibility and response-ability regarding ecological crisis. Returning to Haraway’s arguments about why and how we make kin, if we are to continue living in the Anthropocene we need stories and systems that account for the historical, cultural, and material networks connecting life and that create recuperative practices. Although this essay has only surveyed a small sample of video games, we might see how the medium can be used productively to make kin, challenging anthroponormativity and anthropocentrism in the Anthropocene.

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