Splatoon Fundamentals Awareness Primer

I have decided to write this guide to try and help newcomers and those interested in improving their performance in Splatoon. Whether that's to try and enter the competitive realm, or just try to take their game to a higher level, this guide should be equally helpful to you. This is by no means an exhaustive or definitive guide, but is intended to act as a starting point for core concepts, from which additional ideas and concepts can be built upon with time and experience.

I offer my thanks to _flc (FiveLeafClover)_ for providing access to his competitive guide, which helped consolidate ideas for this write-up. Images are taken from numerous sources; I have tried to offer credit where I know of the source.

Corrections, suggestions, and feedback are always appreciated. If you know of any additional image sources, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Version history:

_**v 0.99**_ _- 29/05/17 – Original release/Draft – NOT Proofread_

_**v 1.00**_ _- 1/06/17 – Completed release and ACTUALLY proofread this time. There are probably still mistakes hiding in here though. Also fixed a few glaring issues I overlooked and didn't think about. Thanks to HC>Kyouma and Gookanheimer for the help._

_**v 1.1**_ _- 7/06/17 – Minor corrections. Credit to Diego (SplatGAF) for the pointers._

<u>*Awareness – The decision-making toolkit*</u>

We touched on awareness a little bit in my earlier Territory Control primer, but here I want to go into the concept's nuances in more detail. In hindsight, maybe this article SHOULD have come first, as awareness underpins one's ability to exert control. Hindsight is 20/20, like the saying goes... but hey, we can touch on that in this article as well. :P

Awareness is a concept that exists in essentially any game or sport. It's a somewhat vague and fuzzy term that encapsulates two main elements:

1) understanding the numerous forms of information that are conveyed to a player at different points of time, and;

2) using said information, from both the past and present, in a manner that allows for meaningful judgment of the game state, and performing appropriate actions in response.

One semi-joke image that floated around in Japanside Twitter attempted to illustrate what players of different ranks actually pay attention to in Splatoon. Whilst tongue-in-cheek, I believe it is a useful starting point in our discussion on awareness. Let's take a look…

The better the player, the more information they make use of.

Translated by myself. Original source unknown.

As you can see, better players pay attention to increasingly larger amounts of information than your average squid. The best players, however, pay attention to ALL the information available to them, as indicated by the large pink box for S+99. This also includes other, less direct forms of information, such as physical locations of players, or the use of game sound.

Indeed, Splatoon actually contains a lot of information, and forms the backbone of our **situational decision-making toolkit.** Every squid will need to use their toolkit in order to assess the game state, and what actions they should take to help bring their team to victory.

Let's begin our breakdown of each game element piece-by-piece, and how we can use this information to our advantage. Hold onto your seatbelts, squids!

The playfield

Basically, the visuals of the game world, and where all the players stand within this virtual space-time, is the playfield. We could break down this section alone all day if we wanted to. Where you are in relation to the map and objects within the map, what turf is around you, and what team owns said turf, however, are the most critical. Think back to the Control Primer, where playfield considerations were discussion, and you are probably already starting to appreciate just how much information you can gleam from the colour of turf alone. Where are enemies likely to be, potential hiding spots, expected directions of enemy attack, and how strong each team stands in relation to control of key points; objective or otherwise; is all given to the player at any one time. I encourage you to go back and re-read the Control Primer after you are done with this particular entry.

Special Meter

A simple gauge that tells you whether your special is available. If it is not available, it informs you of how far away it is from being available. Although not explicitly mentioned in the game, different specials require different amounts of points to fully charge. Points are earned by turfing neutral or enemy coloured ink, or due to various conditions being met in Ranked Modes. Furthermore, death will deplete a portion of this gauge depending on your weapon's "Special Depletion" stat.

The availability of your special, and the potential risk in losing it, will greatly influence your play at any given moment. Do you hold onto your bubble for that clutch play, or do you try and use it to make an aggressive push to keep the enemy away from the objective, hoping to build another one later? Or will you go for an aggressive dive despite your Inkzooka only being 50% charged, knowing that your current hold of the Splat Zone is flaky at best? Maybe the Inkzooka wouldn't be that helpful right now anyway, and you have to keep the enemy out…

"But, I almost had my bubble!" doesn't quite cut it, I'm afraid.

Such considerations can and should be made as you glance at this meter. "Oh, I died and nearly had Kraken" should NOT be something you utter in a game-deciding conflict.

Team Special Use Indicator

A criminally overlooked and often neglected piece of information, particularly for Solo Queue Ranked Mode. Simply, whenever a teammate uses their special, an panel indicator just below your special meter will appear, informing you that a teammate has used their special at that particular moment.

Squads and coordinated teams will likely not need to rely on this as much, as voice communication can help coordinate specials before they are used.

Game Timer

How much time is left in the match.

I like to view the remaining time in a match as a probability indicator of how likely a given team is likely to win at a given moment. For instance, a Rainmaker push to 70 points remaining with 4 minutes remaining has very high probability to be overturned than a push of 70 points with 30 seconds left, despite the point requirement for the lead to be the same. Conversely, a very strong push of the Tower made towards the end of the game, with only 2 points remaining and 20 seconds left, is much less likely to be overturned, even if your team gets completely wiped in the process.

Why is this so?

Time is a valuable and limited resource in life, and so too is it in the game world. With more time available to you and your team, there is more potential to influence the state of the game to more favourable conditions, gaining a better hand to achieve overall victory.

Of course, the enemy team can equally exploit this time for their own ends, turning the game into a constant tug-of-war. When time has been exhausted to its absolute limit, there is no longer any potential for change, and state of play becomes completely set in stone. You have **_no choice_** but to work with the cards you have been dealt, even if it is the worst hand in the universe. The worse your hand, the less margin of error you and your team have in order to win.

HIGH CHANGE CAPACITY   **LOW CHANGE CAPACITY**

Time is a limited resource; make every second count.

This is why Rainmaker "cheese" within the last 30 seconds of the game is such an effective strategy. If one team has a very strong lead and can safely remove the objective out of play such that it is next to impossible to claim back, then there is essentially nothing the enemy team can do about it, unless they pull off the most perfect counter play to break through the enemy team's defences. Conversely, trying to cheese too early often fails, as the enemy is able to use their potential to shift the game state to a point that they can overcome the objective camp and take the lead.

Players should make very careful decisions not just to make the best use of their limited time to achieve victory, but actively find ways to deplete time away from the opponent. Wasting the enemy's time via a distracting flank can be just as valuable as a kill if they're no longer contributing to their team to claim or maintain control of the objective.

The "Squid Icons"

At the top-centre of the main screen lives an array of icons, which I refer to here as the "Squid Icons". Their first function is obvious enough; it tells you how many players on each team are currently active or down. This information can inform you of the likelihood and strength of an enemy push at any given moment, or how safe a push from your team into enemy territory is likely to be.

The second function of the squid icons is a subtler, underutilised, and incredibly valuable piece of information. Each icon is designated to *a very specific player* on each team, depending on their starting position on the Spawn Pad. Furthermore, this designation is consistent across every game, making it very easy to remember with enough practice.


The Squid Icons; demystified.

With this knowledge, not only do you how many players are active or down, but which *specific weapons* are up or down, along with their subs and specials. This grants you extremely powerful insight into how future scenarios will play out, since there are now far fewer variables for you to consider. For instance, if the enemy Tentatek and Luna Blaster are both down, with the remaining enemy players both wielding long-range chargers, then you cannot be sharked by any short-range weapons as you push into the centre of Arowana Mall. If the enemy Zink Mini is down, then the enemy team cannot contest your tower push with a Bubble Huddle.

If anything, it at least gives you the confidence to arrive to a split-second decision and spring into action, instead of hesitating on a push. You will feel more in control of the battles you fight, and confidence is a powerful driver for success. Considering that Garage Team, the devs of Splatoon, are greatly improving the how the Squid Icons convey information in Splatoon 2, now is as good a time as ever to master their usage.

Turf Points counter (Turf War Only)
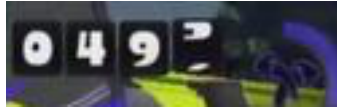
A simple ticking meter that shows how many points you have scored by laying down turf. This isn't particularly useful other than to accurately determine how many points you require to gain Full Charge for your Special. Additionally, it can be used as a rough guide for determining how volatile the game's turf control is. As a rule of thumb, larger scores tend to indicate more volatile swings in turf control, especially on smaller maps.

I will come back to the Turf Points counter a little later in discussion the Results Screen.

Objective counter (Ranked Only)

This field changes depending on the Ranked mode currently in play. Typically, it contains information on how many points each team has scored in relation to the objective, and by virtue, who is currently in the lead. It also identifies whether the objective is controlled by a particular team, or is in a neutral state. Paying careful attention to the objective information at all times is critical in informing your decisions; you may need to give up on your push into the enemy's base if the objective isn't under your control, and slowly heading towards your base.
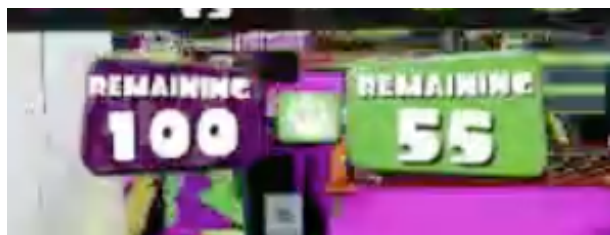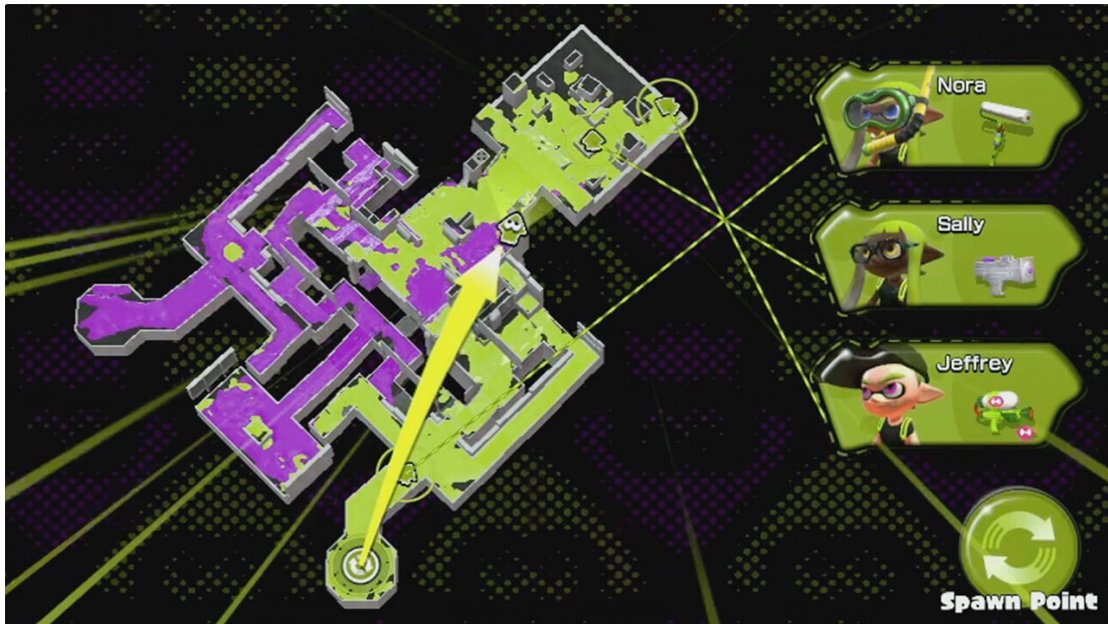

The Splat Zones objective counter
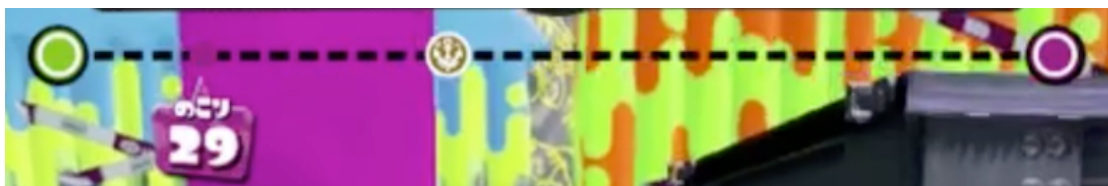
The objective counter for Tower Control & Rainmaker

The Gamepad screen

The Gamepad screen is a bird's eye view of the entire map, showing the true state of all ink in the playfield in real time. In essence, this map is Splatoon's ultimate positional awareness system and anti-flank weapon. Paths of enemy ink being drawn out on the map reveal likely paths that players are attempting to traverse, which can reveal surprise attacks, set-up positions of chargers, and perhaps more importantly… where enemies are NOT likely to be. Enemies who step into, or are hit by, your ink, will appear momentarily on the gamepad map until their HP returns to full (unless they are wearing Ink Resistance!). This can give you a clue as to how an enemy responds to a near-miss engagement. Marked opponents by Point Sensors, Haunt, or Echolocator will also appear on this map for the duration of the mark.

Furthermore, the position of your allies is always displayed on this map, allowing you to make quick judgments as to how safe a particular area of a map is for Super Jump attempts or turf control pushes, whether your allies can protect you given their weapon of choice and distance from your position, where you should reposition to if an area is already well covered.

Be mindful that your opponents can exploit the same knowledge that you can with the gamepad map. Striking during intense action, when your opponents are most likely to be distracted, may help a flank attempt to succeed by being "undetected" until it's too late.

Game sound*

Game sound is something that probably doesn't immediately come to mind with regards to awareness. Nonetheless, it can be just as powerful a tool as any other source of information within the game. It would be impossible to cover each kind of sound within the game here, but understanding the information conveyed by different sounds is something that simply comes with time and experience.

For instance, the intensity and direction of weapon sound can not only betray enemy locations, but also what specific weapon is in that general direction. A Tentatek sounds very different from a Splattershot Pro or a Gal, whilst an E-Litre sounds distinctly different from a Splatterscope. Furthermore, the many Specials in the game make clear, distinct, and easily identifiable sounds, such as the Kraken and Inkzooka. These signature sounds allow you to immediately react to the special with perfect knowledge of what is currently in play. Even a squid who stays immobile in their own ink for too long will make a "blowing bubbles underwater" sound that is audible to anyone nearby, potentially betraying their stealth ambush.

Pay more attention to your surroundings, and you will find yourself with finer reactions and sharper instincts on the playfield.

Awareness blind sights and distractions

Greed

We touched on Greed in the Control Fundamentals guide, but it is worth revisiting in light of this newfound knowledge.

Greed is where you become fixated on achieving a very specific goal or task, whilst completely neglecting any new information that arises during this process. In turn, you become unable to adapt your behaviour as necessary, and are thus punished (in Splatoon's case, with death). Greed also goes by the more familiar name called **Tunnel vision**.

Greed is driven by two things. Firstly, it is fueled the inability to let go of accomplishing a goal you have out set for yourself, which in turn is fueled by fear of failure. It may be that you failed to secure a surprise attack on a 96 Gal Deco and they managed to successfully retreat. It doesn't matter how important they are to the control of the objective, and whether eliminating them will turn the tide of battle or not. Such thoughts will not be going through the mind of a greedy player. Instead, you MUST succeed and redeem your failure at any cost… except, that cost can actually be the game itself. Some may realise that getting themselves killed and losing control of the Splat Zone was a game-losing mistake, but many will not, and instead blame the loss on failing to achieve their initial goal (i.e. not splating the 96 Gal to start off with).

Greed may also be driven by the rush of success. Making big, game-defining plays that puts your team in the lead, or earning absurdly good Kill/Death ratios, garners attention and respect from others, but it may put you and your team in jeopardy by chasing the adrenaline. Focusing on what is required to win the game, rather than being within the spotlight, will help you on your path to victory.

Overanalysis

Overanalysis could be considered the polar opposite of greed. Rather than throw away all awareness in order to achieve a specific task, the overanalyser tries to process so much information within too short a space of time that it results in decision paralysis. Overanalysis, like greed, is fueled by a fear of failure; players want to make the "correct" decision whilst minimising "incorrect" decisions that would place more burden on their teammates or even lose the ability to score points. However, the overanalyser will be unable to come to a decision in the time span they need to, resulting in a null decision. Doing nothing is still doing something, and that decision will be punished accordingly.

Overanalysis unfortunately begets more fear and anxiety as each analysis attempt ends in failure, which can demotivate and cripple aspiring and talented players alike. Some of this can be alleviated through experience. The more situations a player encounters, the more information they have to work with as to what action/outcome paths are likely to occur for a given set of circumstances. This helps speed up the mental analysis process for split-second decision making.

Ultimately, the best way to overcome overanalysis is building self-confidence and having an environment that allows for failure and learning. Having a healthy team environment that doesn't place blame on specific team members, and supporting their each others' efforts can go a long way to improving the confidence and willpower of the individual players within that team. Most of the work must still come from within, however, which may challenge your own perspectives on how you see yourself as a person.

Prediction
A natural consequence of good awareness

Prediction as a term is fairly self explanatory; it is simply _anticipating what an opponent is likely to do given a series of circumstances leading up to the present, and reacting in such a way to address this likely behaviour before it actually occurs._

Good prediction, however, relies on having strong awareness. One must be able to successfully and confidently analyse the current state of play, as well as all relevant plays that have come before the current moment, in order to make meaningful predictions. What constitutes "relevant" play to use for your prediction is in as much of a constant state of flux as the current state of play itself. As such, this is something that naturally develops with time and experience. It also requires developing gradual recognition of common strategies of opponents under certain conditions, and then abstractly applying this to related conditions in the future.

Prediction is an incredibly powerful tool in Splatoon. For example, you may be trying to "predict" a Charger's movements after they've revealed themselves after two or three shots. You realise they're locking down your team from making a necessary push to claim an objective, and thus you decide to for their blind spot. You get a sense for what their most likely path of retreat would be given their current position, intercepting this path and netting an important kill for a game winning push.

Additionally, perhaps you put yourself in the frame of mind of the Charger themselves, thinking about how they mighty anticipate YOU and your movement, and counter-reacting to that potential anticipation. So you make yourself look like you're rushing down the objective in a straight line, and then suddenly break your movement in a different direction, messing up their aim. This latter example is what is referred to as "mind gaming"; essentially, you are thinking two or more steps ahead instead of just one.

Predictions will not always be correct. Your well-crafted scheme to flank a retreating charger may suddenly be foiled by a nearby Tentatek that you didn't consider, or who didn't react in a way you expected. They are predictions, after all; and that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Allow yourself to fail and learn from all your encounters, and simple act in a manner that maximises your chances for success.

The Results Screen

Or…

"Why I think it's actually complete garbage and more squids need to stop looking at it."

People are always looking for ways to improve their game, and perhaps one of the most accessible snapshots of one's performance is the Results Screen. It makes sense right? A summary of the game and the events that happened. What more could you ask for?

Let's take a quick look at it now:

- What weapons were used by each player
- Each player's Kills & Deaths (K/D ratio implied)
- Turf Score (only in Turf War)
- Player Rank (Ranked Mode only)
- Team Objective Score (Drops to 0 in the event of being KO'd, regardless of any points you earn).

Time and time again, I hear squids proclaim:

"But look at my K/D! I'm carrying this team and we still can't win",

or

"Man, I got over 1000 points in Turf War. I'm just so good! What was the rest of my team doing?"

The Result Screen condenses a lot of information into a few simple metrics, but in the process of doing so, considerable amounts of information about the game is lost. It tells you nothing about critical game changing plays, such as losing a fully charged Bubbler to counter a push. Nor does it tell you about blind spots in your awareness, such as constantly neglecting that Splatterscope sitting in opportune positions, being wiped by a player taking a flank route, or not taking out that pesky Dynamo Roller on Mahi-Mahi Splat Zones. Whilst it does provide information on kills and deaths, it offers no context as to the value of said kills and deaths. Were your deaths detrimental to the success of your team, or just a lucky pickoff that you could recover from? A high Turf score could just be two players constantly painting, and repainting the same turf over and over, with no actual control involved.
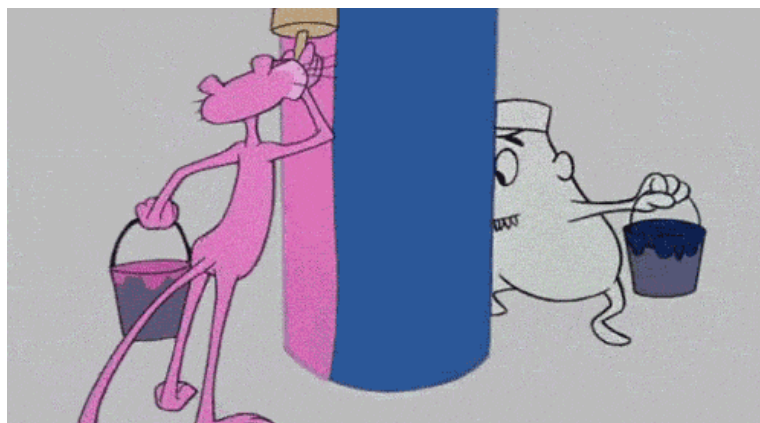
Remember, this is not control… and it never will be.

The results screen in and of itself does very little to understand the nuisances of your play, and should not be taken as some objective truth about one's performance. The only true way to learn what you are doing right or wrong is through careful analysis and reflection of your past play...

___The power of hindsight___
Analysing your play during your journey of self-improvement

In order to understand your strengths and overcome your weaknesses, one must reflect on what they're doing, and why certain outcomes occur in consequence of said actions. The best way to do this is to record your gameplay, and then watch it again later with a fresh set of eyes. In doing so, you have access to all the information of the game that you can view at your leisure rather than relying on memory. Additionally, you do not need to process this information on the fly in a real game, where you are constantly making judgements and decisions. Hindsight is a 20/20 science, as they say; most of us are really good at critical analysis without the pressure of the moment.

Sadly, this approach is limited to those who have purchased capture cards, but if you are serious about improving, then it may well be worth the investment. Given the current uncertainty with video capture for Splatoon 2, it may also be a nice way to get involved with the Splatoon community through streaming or recording your experiences, and capturing funny moments or absurd plays. It can help bring a new angle to your experience.

Another really good option to consider is to ask someone else for their feedback about your play. You know how you can proofread a document half a dozen times and not find any mistakes, but as soon as you give it to someone else, they immediately find dozens of mistakes, including one in the very first sentence? It's very much the same thing with any pursuit in life. You may not realise it, but your own mind develops its own cognitive biases and mental shortcuts without you even realising it. Someone without any direct attachment to you or your gameplay can help provide a different perspective that you may not have considered before, giving you new insights for improvement. Besides, playing and engaging with more people can help develop new friendships on top of new experiences in the process; hardly a bad thing, no?

Ultimately, experience and experimentation matter; the more experience you have, the larger the knowledge pool you have to work with. As you play higher skilled opponents, what were once foolproof strategies will be revealed to hold flaws and weaknesses. Counters to your play that you never considered before will arise and completely shutdown your approach, paving the way for new answers via adaption and retaliation. Sirlin's *Playing to Win* (an excellent and highly recommended read, by the way) describes these traps as "localised maxima" of skill and

knowledge; we won't seek out new hilltops when we are content with what works. By tapping into this "hidden knowledge" of the game; again, to steal Sirlin's terminology; we might just discover new keys to overcoming what were once insurmountable obstacles. Who among us would have thought that the Cherry H3, Rapid Blaster, or Splash-o-matic would have their uses just six months ago? A year ago?

Go forth and explore the intricacies of the game. Allow yourself to fail trying out new weapons, or by pursuing different strategies with a familiar weapon. Try unorthodox ability builds, or builds you may not agree with. Learn what team compositions work for a given map, and what compositions should be avoided. Keep an open mind, play the game, and analyse, analyse, analyse. Only then will new paths on your journey reveal themselves.

Closing Remarks

Awareness forms the backbone of your ability to assess the game state, and thus make meaningful decisions that lead you and your team to victory. It is a skill that will carry you through not just Splatoon, but also in many more games throughout your gaming life. With time, practice, and patience, I hope you come to appreciate the importance and power of your awareness.

For those of you who may have found the Control Primer confusing, I strongly encourage you to give it a second read with your newly armed knowledge of awareness. Perhaps some of the concepts and considerations one must make will make more sense. If you've read this entry first, hopefully everything will start gelling together in your journey to be a better squid.

I will likely revise both of my primers in the future to put Awareness at the forefront, giving new squids the knowledge to exploit the game landscape for their own control upfront. How long that will be though… well, who knows.

Stay Fresh!

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