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White Noise and Newer Media: The Prophetic Impact of Jack's Avatars

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WHITE NOISE AND NEWER MEDIA:
THE PROPHETIC IMPACT OF JACK'S AVATARS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyze Don DeLillo's *White Noise* through a contemporary techno-literate approach that utilizes Internet and game studies to better understand its protagonist, Jack Gladney, and to reevaluate the novel's critical legacy. Jack is not a modernist living in a postmodern world, as critics like Tom LeClair, John Duvall, and Leonard Wilcox have claimed for the many years since the publication of this novel. Lacking the authentic consistency for such a title, he is instead a postmodern human simulacrum sampling different character types to avoid his lack of discernable self. In each role he plays, however, he is abruptly confronted by a failure to successfully inhabit these new selves, which casts a cautionary light on Jack's inauthentic role-play. By examining the year 1984 in which DeLillo's novel was completed and utilizing Gregory Ulmer's avatar theory, the paper contends that Jack's character games and DeLillo's text depicting them are prophetic exercises about how we similarly interact with the Internet and games in ways that complicate subjectivity through digital narrative extension.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
CHAPTER	
I. A NEW WAVELENGTH	1
II. 1984 AND BEYOND	6
III. GAMES JACK CANNOT WIN.....	14
IV. <i>THE AMERICAN BOOK OF THE DEAD</i>	35
REFERENCES	40

CHAPTER ONE

A NEW WAVELENGTH

White Noise, as John Duvall, Mark Osteen, and Leonard Wilcox have made clear, is a novel dictated by mediation and simulacra that documents the active and fruitless avoidance of the “real.” At the center of this tension is protagonist Jack Gladney, the man critics have beatified as Don DeLillo’s saint of modernist anxiety in an overwhelmingly postmodern world. It is this canonization that needs to be contested, for reading Jack hardly leaves one impressed by the authentic consistency of a modern man sticking out amidst mediated madness. In fact, Jack so closely follows the beats of archetypal character sketches before him that he seems to end up buffeted about by how quickly and jarringly he tries to avoid his lack of authentic self. Taking on roles like professor, disaster victim, detective, and lone gunman, Jack is more character type than character—a postmodern pastiche of a man in a postmodern pastiche of a novel. DeLillo’s most famous novel, therefore, is not just a story reacting to the simulacra of mediation and technology; it is one related by a human simulacrum creating various versions of himself, leaving the audience and Jack with no semblance of an original self. However, in each mediated character role, he is abruptly confronted by a failure to successfully inhabit these selves or adapt them beyond their certain mediated contexts. Jack’s failures, the failures of fixated “character types” Jack expects of those around him, and of course the endpoint of inevitable death that captivates this text—almost called *The American Book of the Dead*—all demonstrate how the faulty framework of Jack’s inadaptably narrative fails to encompass the chaos that comes from the real’s refusal to be plotted out. Since

the “real” here means our existence as it persists outside of mediated screens, that prospect should terrify the protagonist and his cast of characters trying and failing to avoid it. As this essay analyzes Jack’s character play through a more modern technological vantage, I believe if we read this novel with a critical eye looking forward, not just right at the immediate content/context or—as too many scholars have by this point—looking back, then *White Noise* can carry a fresh new wavelength amidst the critical “white noise” that has drowned out what made the text so radical in the first place. Jack’s attempts and failures will again mean something to a cultural geography vastly different and even more digitally altered these thirty years since the novel’s debut. Delillo completed his novel in 1984, so if we examine that year’s technological contributions and speculations for Internet and game studies, it will give us a starting point toward discussing how the concept of character established here is continued through the contemporary understanding of avatar, making Jack’s games and DeLillo’s text depicting them prophetic exercises about how subjectivity is complicated by narrative and technological extension.

The scattered feeling of *White Noise*’s loosely structured opening act prepares the rest of the novel for Jack’s lighting from character to character as an episodic man in his interconnected plots. We will see that our understanding of “character” will shift as our digitally different impression of the novel has, but the meaning of character (no matter my interchangeable vocabulary) persists basically the same. Laura Barrett comments that this shifting nature of the novel as a whole makes it “a generic hybrid, a nexus of types of fiction—the domestic drama, the college satire, the apocalyptic melodrama, the crime

novel, the social satire” (97). She continues that this collage effect is intentional, for “That trespassing of boundaries which is typical of Postmodern fiction reminds us that we are the product of myriad representations” (98). To extend her point, I posit that we are not just the products of but even become these myriad representations. This qualification leads nicely toward reiterating this essay’s departure from the prevailing critical legacy stating, as Leonard Wilcox insists, that “Jack Gladney, the narrator of *White Noise*, is a modernist displaced in a postmodern world” (348). Though he does warrant that Jack “often succumbs to the Baudrillardian condition, floating ‘ecstatically’ in a delirium of networks,” (348) Wilcox and other critics like him are too fixed upon the notion that Jack is fixed upon a true Jack, as if he were after his real subjectivity in a world of mediated reality. But a story this intentionally fragmented is clearly the product of its narrator, therefore Jack is more interested in playing characters among the beats of *White Noise*’s pastiche effects than becoming the real Jack. When I say then that Jack avoids his lack of authentic self, as I already have and will again, it is this notion of a heroic modernist Jack that I refute. He is so fixated upon playing characters that we are left with no impression of Jack’s true character, making him more postmodern mediator of sampled personas than modern man personified in the wrong time. Or more precisely, as we are left with only Jack’s characters and little impression of the character of Jack, he is really more of a postmodern mediation(s). We may examine the protagonist as compiled representations rather than presented self by offering a contemporary technoliterate case for what digital mediums teach us about Jack and his character games.

The plot trajectory and thematic resonance of *White Noise* are both influenced by and in reaction to the permeating effects of digital technology. Given that the book has been exhaustively analyzed, by scholars noted above among many more, as a seminal text of television-age literature, however, it is time to say more about the screens at play here other than those of the “tube.” DeLillo as an author is one most shaped by the visual medium of television—after all, he worked in advertising before his late blooming career as a literary darling—but it is shortsighted to deny what else his works could say to the ever increasing mediums of gaming and the Internet. Though the technologies and their ideas were pretty infantile at the time of *White Noise*’s publication, the novel’s status as a text amid 1984’s technological zeitgeist renders it, for the sake of my argument, DeLillo’s prophetic text about the way we digitally manifest our extended identities through online avatars. 1984 was the year of the Apple Macintosh computer’s debut (and the most famous Super Bowl commercial ever advertising its arrival), the publication of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, and the interim between the Atari’s demise and the Nintendo Entertainment System’s North American release. Looking back then, in this year when new technology was on everyone’s mind, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* sticks out as the author’s extension of his character’s fixation with past narratives and exhausted mediums; yet, it simultaneously predicts the fallout of what happens when, as Greg Ulmer argues, avatar becomes a new formation of identity through digital technologies, speaking years ahead to digital frontiers that have even further mediated our “real.” Therefore, this new approach to DeLillo’s novel that incorporates theories of avatar as manifested in Internet and game studies will give us both an updated cultural lens through

which to better understand Jack Gladney and a new appreciation for the prophetic impact of Jack's "game playing" and DeLillo's narrative orchestrating.

CHAPTER TWO

1984 AND BEYOND

Don DeLillo began writing *White Noise* late into 1982 and published its final draft in early 1985, but it is the year 1984 in which he completed it that most highlights its transitional timeliness. That year in technology truly began with the most famous Super Bowl commercial to ever air, Apple's "1984" advertisement. More short film than commercial, this ad directed by Ridley Scott features a woman in bright red and white contrasted against a cold and gray future who hurls a hammer at and shatters the screen on which a "Big Brother" like authority captivates a uniformly dreary crowd of sad men with shaved heads. As the evocative scene concludes, Apple tacks on the advertising pitch of the commercial with an enticing tagline that states, "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like '1984'" ("1984"). Using George Orwell's dystopian classic *1984* as its context, Apple implicitly compares then-reigning IBM's lock on the computer market to a fate as dreadful as Big Brother's ideological dominance. This analogy makes Apple that hammer wielding, chain liberating woman. The Macintosh is boldly touted as the free-thinking individual's solution that will save society from a fate worse than faceless dystopia. In the computing world of 1984, Apple made itself the unique hero against big institutional odds.

White Noise contains similar thematic conflict between the individual and the crowd. Just two years after this novel's publication, Tom LeClair published the first critical analysis of it, in which he famously calls DeLillo a "'systems novelist'... who analyze[s] the effects of institutions on the individual" (Osteen xii). Huddled under the

umbrella term “institution” could also be the public, which *White Noise* interacts with constantly through scenes as trivial as Jack’s mall shopping experience and as catastrophic as “The Airborne Toxic Event.” Stacey Olster’s take on the text posits that, “The characters in *White Noise* can only locate themselves collectively within the crowd and by way of those places that facilitate congregation” (82). With Jack in mind, however, fading into the crowd goes against the search for character he continually attaches himself to through all parts of the novel. Rather than identify himself “collectively,” Jack references himself against the crowd in order to become a distinct node in the system, for a system is necessary for identity formation, which is very much the way that a “story” is needed for a character to emerge. In Jack’s story, he would rather play the heroine with the hammer than be a part of the blank and gray crowd, recognizing her red and white clothing need that dreary palate to stand out. DeLillo’s other novels similarly feature what Susana S. Martins calls these “meditations on how individuals are forged within systems of language and ideology” (90). Bucky Wunderlick, protagonist of DeLillo’s 1973 novel *Great Jones Street*, chases the character and caricature of the rock star. Lee Harvey Oswald as rendered by DeLillo in *Libra* in 1988 longs to become an “agent of history” rather than be a page in the history book. Bill Gray from 1991’s *Mao II* maintains a persona as the reclusive author, more important for having not published in years than if he were to publish a new novel. Most importantly, we will see that Jack plays a revolving cast of characters bigger than himself to obscure his lack of authentic self. What all of these examples include, however, is an attempt to become character, not quite a quest for realized identity. The faceless crowd may

therefore be where Jack's lack of authentic self is best lost, hence why he employs it as a jumping-off point into his characters. Similarly, the extended spaces of emerging computer technology offer a direction for users to flee toward as well.

The resulting ease of access to a personal computer as a gateway to new realities ultimately paved the way for the Internet's identity fluidity. Jack, as if he were online in real life, creates characters to adapt to his evolving situations in ways that continually allow him to elide his authentic self. Not just the narrator of this novel as book, he actually narrates himself within the plot as well. Jack's narrative play over his expanding cast of characters may resemble a kind of real-life writing, but what he does not understand is how his persona sampling evokes Gregory Ulmer's concept of avatar. In our own Internet-indebted time, Ulmer writes of the self-extending practice of becoming one's avatar, to understand and inhabit one's online identity as something not just "oneself" but another character entirely, for "Avatar is not mimetic of one's ego, but a probe beyond one's ownness" ("Avatar Emergency"). Explaining that, "The term *avatar* in Sanskrit literally means *descent*," Ulmer discusses how the analogy comes from the times Krishna came down to earth and took on embodiment in Hindu mythology ("Avatar Emergency"). Our own "descent" then is becoming our online selves, like Jack the narrator narrating his characterized extensions. This playfulness is a pastime born from what Ulmer calls the emerging language apparatus: "electracy" ("Avatar Emergency"). It is learning to communicate in the mediums of our increasingly visual/digital culture, a step away from strictly print literacy to electronic fluency and production. To connect the literate to the electrate, he claims that, "Playing one's avatar

is to electracy what writing an essay is to literacy” (“Avatar Emergency”). In his embrace of the digital apparatus, he encourages that, “You need to meet avatar, that part of you inhabiting cyberspace” (“Avatar Emergency”). If this is the case, then Jack’s “characters,” a more literate construct, may be understood as “avatars” given the 1984 milieu discussed earlier. This (re)introduction is such a problem for DeLillo’s protagonist however because his narrative account presents readers with Jack’s avatars, but no real Jack to speak of. He clings to his characters because they are the only way he can play the games he inhabits.

While Jack may be mostly *characters* with little discernable self, the real we daily encounter still confronts us with the fact that playing with identity never completely escapes it. Jack’s character failures to be discussed may point to this exchange. Ulmer claims that avatar is a “probe beyond one’s ownness,” (“Avatar Emergency”) but even that relationship requires one’s real identity as the form from which to extend. This identity play then still operates within a rules-bound structure, for all games need rules to determine action and obstacle. Within Ulmer’s electracy, the technologies we interact with are tied to an apparatus that includes individual identity, so he suggests that we employ avatar to understand where this emerging language apparatus is taking us and how we may intervene and take some control over it (“Avatar Emergency”). Electracy is shifting identity from a literate modernist self toward something more distributed, so character may morph as it becomes the term avatar, but both function as extensions beyond identity still tied up by identity. If the game still requires the subject’s subjectivity, then meeting avatar, as Ulmer sees it, helps us realize that our online

characters may not be ourselves but they are compiled from our desires to be them.

Another merit of *White Noise*'s prophecy revealed here then is the way it depicts a logic of emerging technology entangled within our desires to appropriate media to become avatar. The way Jack plays characters is how we would play avatars, and both are exposed within identity by how they want out of identity. Therefore, we may not know who Jack is, but we know who he wants to be, for better or for worse.

This potential good and bad of playing avatar is more explicitly pursued in another book of 1984 fame, the science fiction classic *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. Gibson's novel has been so influential that it actually coined the term "cyberspace" and helped set off an entirely new genre of science fiction known as cyberpunk. His text taught people how to talk about the Internet before there even was much of an Internet. *Neuromancer*'s protagonist Case lives in a future plugged into a virtual reality network called the Matrix, where people can bodily experience a kind of Internet that our society has still not reached by connecting through their central nervous system. A former data-thief whose job description requires hacking into the Matrix's various environments, Case's nervous system has been infected as punishment for stealing from a former employer, leaving him unable to log on to the Matrix and resultingly drug addicted and suicidal. The future that Gibson creates culturally and economically depends on people participating in the identity extension and fragmentation of becoming avatar. Case feels like only half of a person without his ability to log into the Matrix, making him the exact opposite of Jack: all self with no avatar. In exchange for having his nervous system's ability to link to cyberspace restored, Case therefore takes the job that sets the incident

packed plot into fast motion. With this opportunity, Case can retrieve the digital relationship by which he really knows himself. Ulmer discusses this symbiotic selfhood as a power structure but not in the order we may expect: “[Avatar] is indeed a relationship with self, but the power flows in exactly the reverse direction: the player is and does what avatar wants” (“Avatar Emergency”). This inverted succession is depicted at novel’s end when, due to a close encounter with the titular supercomputer Neuromancer, Case glimpses a copy of himself within the Matrix living happily ever after with a similar cyberspace copy of his murdered girlfriend Linda. Though Case carries on in the real world and even has a new girlfriend, his actual happy ending where he gets what he wants plays out in cyberspace. These sparse but telling details reveal a provocative lens through which to view Jack’s more implicit approach to avatar as he “hacks” his own narrative game. In fact, *Neuromancer* describes Case linking his nervous system to the Matrix as “jack[ing] in” (Gibson 103). As Jack plays his avatars, he hacks his reality in ways more conceptual than digital, although the basic logic is the same. His attempts to control his plot nevertheless feature improvisations of character similar to Case’s hacking skills. Throughout DeLillo’s novel, we see how Jack “jacks” in to his own narrative hyper-reality where he plays not his best self but a character even better than that in a game that wants to be played.

The concept of playing a separate character and becoming avatar reaches ideological completion in the deceptively simple act of playing a video game. It is easy to overlook the narrative power of video games as something worth considering—indeed, game studies is still a young academic field due to lack of scholarly interest until recent

years. For that matter, 1984 was a year that thought little of this technology's provocative play in identity. The Atari had just plummeted under the video game crash of 1983 because "no one," in the large economic sense, was playing it. Even though the Nintendo Entertainment System was exponentially gaining reputation in Japan, it would not reach North America until the fall of 1985. Therefore, this pivotal year is poignant for its omission of what is now a booming culturally legitimate medium. DeLillo has never even written about video games, so even a mention of the machines is nowhere to be found in *White Noise*. His text is, nevertheless, certainly prophetic of how we may conceptualize the way we become avatar through video game play as both first person player and third person character. Even DeLillo's first novel *Americana* predicts this provocative concept—albeit about DeLillo's favorite subject of television—in a scene as mediated as the best of *White Noise*'s double removes, when protagonist David Bell rehearses lines with a man playing his father, who reads, "[Television] moves [man] from first person consciousness to third person. In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be...Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled" (270-271). A video game, as a media technology with increased screen interaction, similarly affords a chance to become a character outside of oneself. The most telling part of these recited lines is the conclusion, that chance to enter the third person singular. One does not realize a new subjectivity but becomes something else entirely: one's avatar.

The relationship of avatar as described by Ulmer is aptly acted out in nearly any video game, but let us begin with the most culturally resonant video game here,

Nintendo's original franchise star, Mario of *Super Mario Bros.* and nearly twenty consecutive titles—and those are only main series titles. When one plays any Mario game, he or she both is Mario and is not. There is a sequence of identity extension in which one is oneself, one plays through Mario, and one *is* Mario. This relationship gets even more direct once we can design our own avatars rather than simply playing with pre-built characters, which is increasingly standard practice in certain console games and nearly all MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). As Jack becomes his various characters and hides within their best qualities, game character design is readily brought to mind. Most gamers create characters with traits well beyond the abilities of themselves creating and playing. Interestingly enough, Jack's aforementioned character failures—not adapting well to selves that furthermore do not adapt beyond prescribed situations—have manifested in one of the most popular gaming franchises recently, the *Mass Effect* trilogy. The main character of this popular multi-platform series is Commander Shepard, who can be either male or female. Each gender has a default character design, and oddly enough, many gamers who choose to create their own avatar forms of Shepard end up with typically less attractive, more generic versions of the hero. The games therefore seem to implicitly reward those who go with the original design, while gamers more like Jack who desire to create themselves in whatever image they see fit are left with diminished returns. How these diminished returns feature in the novel proper will concern this next section as it analyzes each of Jack's character roles and his inability to master them as he fails at the very games he plays.

CHAPTER THREE

GAMES JACK CANNOT WIN

Jack's avatar role at the novel's beginning is the persona of official and officious college professor. I use "avatar" and "character" interchangeably, as many games refer to avatars as characters. Jack's avatar here is not just any college professor but is the founder of the Hitler Studies major at The-College-on-the-Hill. As innovator of such a controversial major, Jack feels he must enlarge his persona and protect himself by descending into an academic archetype; in other words, he must become what a professor looks like. Per his chancellor's advice, he aims to "'grow out' into Hitler" (DeLillo 17). Jack first expands his name, dubbing himself J.A.K. Gladney, an amusing example of the assumption that names with initials are stereotypically classier. He next expands his waistline as he gains weight to resemble his subject. Like Hitler, Jack yearns to command physical respect being "tall, paunchy, ruddy, jowly, big-footed and dull. A formidable combination" (17). And finally, Jack increases his mystery, obscuring himself through notoriety with "glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses" and a black academic "sleeveless tunic puckered at the shoulders" he calls his "medieval robe" (17, 9). This embellished image grooming is what turns Jack into "the false character that follows the name around" (17). His dark glasses and robe even resemble mask and cape, making him seem like some super-professor and foreshadowing the hero that Jack wants to be when the Airborne Toxic Event cripples the town of Blacksmith. Jack's "character enhancements" are particularly reminiscent of game character design as previously discussed. Marcus Dickinson, a real-life player of the game *EVE Online*, demonstrates a contemporary

example of creating online characters, and how a feedback loop extends into offline life, a testimony that could only be told in times like these and had already been somewhat predicted by DeLillo's Jack years ago. Dickinson, previously overweight, was inspired by his tough and muscled *EVE Online* character Roc Wieler to drop forty-five pounds and tone up. Vowing, "I'm a role player... I take things seriously," Dickinson perhaps says what Jack only does: "Something snapped inside me, and I realized I wasn't being true to my brand. Why can't I be this character? Why can't I look like this? He acts and talks like me because he is me. I'm the one who gave him life" (Wilson). Dickinson, unlike Jack, let his avatar positively influence his original self which is a step away from Jack's shortcoming; however, the newly fit gamer's intensive workout regimen sounds eerily like Jack's mission to look more like a character than whatever "himself" is. Jack packs on the pounds to seem like the more intimidating presence the founder of Hitler Studies should be in a way similar (but not as healthy) to Dickinson's decision to pack on muscle to resemble Roc. Both men (one fictional and one poignantly real) aim to bodily become a character, but the effects extend beyond physique.

This hyper-reality enacted on even the small scale is further indulged by Jack's dramatic, robe-flaunting flair: "I like clearing my arm from the folds of the garment to look at my watch. The simple act of checking the time is transformed by this flourish" (DeLillo 9). Jack's wistful observation that "Decorative gestures add romance to a life" reinforces the even bodily escapism he enacts by inhabiting the character of professor (9). Dickinson's "bodily escapism" has fascinatingly affected the body he originally wanted out of, but even his decision to shed weight feels outside self: "He executed his fitness

plan as seriously as Roc would execute a mission. He told himself his weight loss was a matter of life or death. ‘If I do not make these changes today, and every day going forward, I will die,’ he says. ‘I know it sounds tragic but that's what it took for me’” (Wilson). For Dickinson, even that dedication was role-play. Therefore, when he growls at his wife in Roc’s characteristic gravely voice, she jokes, “‘I have to remind him that it is a character’” (Wilson). Jack’s example before him, however, may make us hesitate to laugh. Jack’s exaggerated reputation of dressing the part, acting the part, and becoming the part relies on Jack the performer more than it does an actual Jack, so Dickinson’s newly fit life by comparison starts to feel like a bit of lifelong performance itself. Jack’s performance as college professor, we see however, becomes an ill-fit casting.

Jack cannot play his own game, for he cannot seem to master his character’s abilities. Even his own adlibs end up beyond his grasp. When a class discussion begins over the plot to kill Hitler, Jack waxes philosophical about the nature of plots in general. After pontificating that “‘all plots tend to move deathward,’” his narrated thoughts second-guess the “‘professor’s” point, frantically wondering, “‘Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?’” (DeLillo 26). Jack cannot understand the lines J.A.K. Gladney speaks. Nor does Jack know the lines that the initial bearing, pretentious wardrobe wearing scholar alter-ego should either: Jack the Hitler Studies founder does not even speak German. Of course, “‘as the most prominent figure in Hitler studies in North America,” this shortcoming is his dirty little secret (31). Since his colleagues are mostly fluent, and his students must take at least a year of German, Jack is just the liar behind the curtain: “‘I was living, in short, on the edge of a landscape of vast shame” (31). But he has

already committed to the character too much to reveal what is not really there. The part has taken the place left vacant by any authentic self in Jack's narrative. Cornered by his character type, he confesses:

Because I'd achieved high professional standing, because my lectures were well attended and my articles printed in the major journals, because I wore an academic gown and dark glasses day and night whenever I was on campus, because I carried two hundred and thirty pounds on a six-foot three-inch frame and had big hands and big feet, I knew my German lessons would have to be secret. (31-32)

Both like and unlike how Dickinson was galvanized to get fit by seeing too much of himself in the kinds of people who play this online game at the 2009 *EVE Online* FanFest, Jack feels pressured to finally learn his academic subject's language by an upcoming conference to be held at The-College-on-the-Hill: but he wants to circumvent the public shame by mastering German before anyone is any wiser. Jack is too thoroughly J.A.K. now to admit to being anything else. But it is not just a neglect to learn the language but an active inability on Jack's part that really communicates his failure to completely become the character of college professor. He laments, "Something happened between the back of my tongue and the roof of my mouth that made a mockery of my attempts to sound German words" (31). This failure in fluency and revelation of phoniness explains why Jack treats his German teacher's bilingual proficiency so mystically: "He was only demonstrating certain basic pronunciation patterns but the transformation in his face and voice made me think he was making a passage between

levels of being” (32). Jack’s own passage hampered by shortcomings in his character is what leaves him fleeing from type to type. If German is unavailable to him for use “as a charm, a protective device,” (31) then he must find other character traits to hide behind, maybe even entire characters: who better than Adolf Hitler?

Hitler for Jack is not just the historical figure, but is the character through which Jack becomes the part of professor. Just as Gibson’s Case can manipulate the Matrix, Jack hacks his reality as professor with Hitler as his tool. It is admittedly impressive that he is not just any college professor—he invents an entirely new major, his own level designed for the game. Murray compliments his endeavor early in the novel:

You’ve established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction, literally or metaphorically. This is the center, the unquestioned source. He is your Hitler, Gladney’s Hitler. (11)

Jack’s appropriation of not only the professor’s role—a kind of upgrade—but also the image and concept of Hitler himself indicate how, through his avatar, Jack rigs himself as the continual center of his game. This particular ploy for plot is understandably expected of a professor who spends his professional time with other colleagues who build entire syllabi around “the famous and the dead” (327). At a certain faculty lunch, Alfonse Stompanato, chairman of the department of American Environments, begins aggressively grilling his colleagues, ““Where were you when James Dean died?”” (68). When Nicholas Grappa cannot answer right away, Stompanato gets angrier and more derisive while

Grappa just pleads, “Ask me Joan Crawford... Ask me Gable, ask me Monroe,” a few names on a continued list that are not James Dean (69). These men not only stake their professional scholarship on the lives of celebrities and public personalities. They furthermore, judging by the intense competition of situating oneself in relation to the death of important figures, stake their narrative selves on them. *Americana* foreshadows this intensity for celebrity trivia in a couple of ways. As DeLillo’s first novel, it established his trademark fascination with what protagonist David Bell constantly reveres as “the image” (*Americana* 12). Bell, moreover, often cites the films of Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster, even attempts to frame some of his actions as what Douglas or Lancaster might do (20, 59). This character motivation based on characters and an impassioned lunch conversation about celebrity deaths are both symptoms of the fact that in a culture run by the image, celebrities—even the villains of history like Adolf Hitler—get beamed up and re-broadcast as part of that image.

Like a game with mechanics similar to more popular titles, Jack’s notoriety as the founder of Hitler Studies at The-College-on-the-Hill similarly offers him the chance to link his character arc to a great backstory, an attempt made by “helpless and fearful people [who] are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom” according to his colleague Murray Siskind (DeLillo 287). Barrett sympathizes with this strategy for survival when she writes, “Jack’s wistful longing for narratives... is understandable in light of their promises of personal integration in the face of fragmentation, of transcendental meaning in the face of misprision, of cosmic order in the moment of chaos” (99). Murray commends and scolds Jack for his attempt to

become a prominent character via Hitler's historical persona: "On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength. I sense a confusion of means" (288). Therefore, though he tells Jack that it was a bold move "to use" Hitler, he still schools him on where he went wrong (288). Leading him along like a pupil, he teaches Jack that his "confusion of means" was that he "stood out on the one hand and tried to hide on the other" (288). Jack tries to become the character while concealing himself inside another type of character, and the tension topples his entire technique. Murray didactically quizzes, "What is the name we give to this attempt?" and Jack replies at his most honest: "Dumb" (288). Jack's "old college try" at the professor archetype cannot be saved by the celebrity of his subject, so his appropriation of Hitler joins the tally of failed avenues through which to borrow an authentic persona. Professor J.A.K. Gladney is undone by Jack's failure to live up to the character just in time for that stereotype to fail to protect him from the indiscriminating disaster of "The Airborne Toxic Event."

In Part II of DeLillo's novel, that disaster, a black cloud of spilled Nyodene Derivative, disrupts Jack's illusion of privileged safety, and in this resulting fallout, he clings to the illusion of an Other to once again characterize and be characterized rather than face experience authentically. As we see Jack shift from disaster viewer to disaster victim within this state of emergency, we should notice the glow of the television screen casting its influential light over every move he makes to be plotted in someone else's narrative. As I have already said, the televisual angle has been taken by scholars like Duvall and Wilcox, but this particular screen nicely predicates what DeLillo can likewise

say to game screens and computer windows. For it is within any screen, in fact, that the Other can be found. This Other of a different kind is not just simply “other people,” but is rather a character that only exists in the screened plot of mediated reality. Evidence that the othering of mediation does not just need a television screen to happen may be cited by examples both trivial and tragic. Take for instance the overwhelming popularity of video compilations of funny accidents on YouTube, anthologized proof that the suffering of others is amusing, even more so when the viewer does not know the victim. Speaking of humor, a far more tasteless example is extremely recent and extremely indicative of DeLillo’s discernment into the future; the missing Malaysia Flight 370 took very little time to spark similar jokes across various social media comparing it to Oceanic Flight 815 from the popular television drama *Lost*. The majority of the public is unaffected by the tragedy of the flight—currently believed to have crashed in the Indian Ocean—and therefore feel free to joke about it. In the eerily predictive events of *White Noise*, as the “feathery plume” becomes a “black billowing cloud” Jack clings to the role of superior outsider, just watching bad things only happening other places (111, 113). Once it is finally considered a full-blown “Airborne Toxic Event” though, Jack still seeks a role to play, even if that means being the disaster victim and becoming the Other himself.

Within the perceived world of mediated reality is a perceived need for this “Other,” for Jack as disaster viewer needs something to view, or more poignantly, needs a way to view himself. Jean Paul Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness* that, “I can know myself only through the mediation of the Other” (51). What this quote points to is the inherent selfishness that the idea of the Other entails. In one of his many conversations

with Murray, Jack one time laments, “I’d like to lose interest in myself... Is there any chance of that happening?” (DeLillo 152). Murray’s blunt rejoinder is simply, “None. Better men have tried” (152). Then he is stuck with his self-absorption, and the Other merely helps accent it. This selfishness is how Jack compartmentalizes apocalypse and renders himself perceivably untouchable: bad things only happen to other people. Jack Gladney believes this lie wholeheartedly every time he assures his son Heinrich the cloud “won’t come this way” and states so matter-of-factly: “I’m a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don’t happen in places like Blacksmith” (114). Jack certainly has not lost interest in himself as he gives explicit voice to the othering effect the media have on their viewers. He feels protected by the character he creates just like Dickinson feels strengthened by Roc Wieler, the online avatar through which he paradoxically feels he really experiences himself.

Once he is unable to resist the role-threatening proximity of the cloud as it comes “this way,” his illusion finds itself in danger of disillusionment, as he puts off the idea that those who perceive their Others can likewise become someone else’s Other. If the media convince people that bad things only happen to Others, then this false truism can be considered an example of Jacques Derrida’s “center.” Derrida explains, “The function of this center was... to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure” (278). The structure at play here is this postmodern othering effect, and at its center is the disaster victim as Other, drawing upon Derrida’s

notion that “classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically *within* the structure and *outside* it” (278). The Other may be the center, but it is outside the structure, which means, “The center is not the center” (279). But when Jack and his family sit down for dinner to the sound of sirens warning of the chemical spill, what Derrida calls a “rupture” occurs, because “when the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought, that is to say repeated” this center is now decentered (280). Richard Devetak, in his own analysis that implicitly puts stock in DeLillo’s prophetic merit by comparing *White Noise* to the reaction to and fallout of September 11, applies this rupture nicely to the concept of narrative by theorizing that “events” like the Airborne Toxic Event upset the “story so far,” for “An event truly worthy of the name disrupts, perhaps destroys, any pre-existing frame of reference; it exceeds intelligibility within prevailing frameworks of understanding” (796). Once Jack Gladney realizes this “sonic monster lay hidden nearby for years,” (DeLillo 118) his narrative identity shifts and he then must be forced to face the fact that he is vulnerable to disaster too. This upset then requires him to think about the structurality of the othering effect as structure. Disaster renders Jack, according to Olster’s criticism of *White Noise*, “a college professor forced to realize that he is just every man in any city” (79). The outcome of this decentering then renders him, and anyone else suffering disaster and having to think through these same mindbenders, the center. Martins expounds upon this jarring reevaluation by clarifying, “The startling thing about television’s citationality is that sometimes, what’s happening on TV is also happening to *you*” (105). Just as startling today is the similar fact that what we read and see on the Internet or maybe even play in a

video game has the capacity to befall us too. Now that it is happening to Jack, it all comes full circle when those othering are themselves othered.

This disturbance, however, is unacceptable to Jack. Derrida states that, “anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset” (279). Part II depicts a few ways that Jack plays a game convincing himself he never played and clings to his status as outsider of the othering effect. To continue dabbling in game terminology, Jack wants to enact a game in which he may function as an NPC (non-playable character) safe from the risks of having to play. One tactic to avoid falling prey to another’s othering is to seek out minor mishaps within the mayhem with which to continue identifying Others. For example, when Jack and his family pass a bloody traffic accident on the way to their evacuation site, this sample of carnage gives them some small sense of superiority in their larger predicament. Jack waxes poetic, saying, “The scene of injured people, medics, smoking steel, all washed in a strong and eerie light, took on the eloquence of a formal composition. We passed silently by, feeling curiously reverent, even uplifted by the sight of the heaped cars and fallen people” (DeLillo 120). Jack’s lyric observation is troubling because it describes an actual accident right before their eyes like a televised (or filmed or mediated) occurrence and turns those people into this “show’s” characters. Now that the structure is decentered, and anyone is subject to othering, the system becomes a desperate search, and that uplift is finding one more Other. This scene is a fine example of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “symbolic violence” of sensational news deadening one’s perception of Other brought out of the television set

and into reality. Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as “violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it” (246). Violence, of course, shares its etymology with “violation,” and what Bourdieu claims is violated, no matter if it is only symbolically, by the “sensational news” of “blood, sex, melodrama, and crime,” is the sensibilities of both those who construct media and those who intake media: the tragic reality that these disasters are befalling people is deadened as those they film are othered (247). Here on the roadside, actual disaster gets the televised treatment by Jack’s viewer character. Whatever dehumanizing tactic it may take, he does not want to find himself at the center of the decentered center.

Once this simulacrum inevitably fails, Jack the disaster victim is left with the decision to realize that the decentered subject can become a new center. It may be someone else’s apocalypse, but he will star in it. In the chaos of the airborne toxic event, what transpires here is a heightened fervor for this new role disproportionate to its actual involvement. If one is to face reality, one chooses hyper-reality instead. Jack then steps into his new identification as the character of another’s Other on an implicit, unconscious level first, then later on an explicit, conscious level. At first, he quells his excitement, maybe does not even recognize it. Jack, as he drives away from the changing wind of Nyodene D. does not realize how much he longs for borrowed stardom when he complains, “I wanted them to pay attention to the toxic event. I wanted to be appreciated for my efforts in getting us to the parkway. I thought of telling them about the computer tally, the time-factored death I carried in my chromosomes and blood. Self-pity oozed

through my soul. I tried to relax and enjoy it” (159). The disaster victim wants to play the hero now and be recognized for his daring escape. Unbeknownst to himself, he wants to show how much he has embraced his role as the Other in a dramatized disaster scene. Interestingly enough, what Jack does before he even realizes he has embraced his own othering is claim victimhood, which gives himself more credit than he gave the faceless unfortunate of television disaster, or maybe even worse, the car accident on their way to refuge. He affords himself self-pity; he gives Others much less, for as Murray puts it: ““better him than me”” (169). This need for an uneven playing field means that even one’s own othering still others, not that Jack may admit that in the midst of crisis. One’s tragedy is treated as more important than anyone else’s.

Once this unconscious acceptance of self-othering recognizes itself, this love for spectacle is what leads to such profound disappointment at the conclusion of Part II. Firstly, a “stunning innovation” assures that the airborne toxic event will be taken care of with not much more chaos (160). Now that their disaster is robbed of its disastrousness, Jack and his fellow victims “feel a little weary, gluttoned in an insubstantial way, as after a junk food spree” (160). Secondly, television media do not validate the airborne toxic event as news. All their disaster merits is ““fifty-two words by actual count”” on a second rate news source (161). As evacuees huddle in fear, a man melodramatically carries a blank television set and incites the crowd with indignant questions:

Shouldn’t the streets be crawling with cameramen and soundmen and reporters? Shouldn’t we be yelling out the window at them, ‘Leave us alone, we’ve been through enough, get out of here with your vile

instruments of intrusion.’ Do they have to have two hundred dead, rare disaster footage, before they come flocking to a given site in their helicopters and network limos? What exactly has to happen before they stick microphones in our faces and hound us to the doorsteps of our homes, camping out on our lawns, creating the usual media circus? Haven’t we earned the right to despise their idiot questions? (162)

This man’s ire hints at what the crowd secretly desires in their lowest moment of fear: to have it televised. If one is to accept one’s status as disaster victim and become someone else’s Other, then this shift requires media coverage to complete the othering effect. The game has to be created for anyone to finish playing it. Now that othering has been accepted as inevitable, Jack Gladney aims to embody this new avatar available.

In light of this desire for recognition, Part III of the novel illustrates Jack taking on a number of masculine, cinematic, and noir-ish roles to guarantee being seen and known. He yet again simultaneously enlarges and shrinks himself, for he steps into the shoes of culturally identifiable tough guys and men of mystery while eliding his identification as “just Jack.” *White Noise*’s concluding “Dylarama” features Jack as he discovers that his wife Babette has been taking the drug Dylar, which inhibits fear of death, and then steps back as he confronts Babette’s supplier, Mr. Gray (A.K.A. Willie Mink), whom she has been sleeping with in exchange for the pill. Jack becomes the intrepid sleuth sneaking around his own house to catch Babette at her pill-popping, like a domestic Phillip Marlowe. He further indulges this role-play by having clandestine meetings in dark corners of his college campus with an informant of sorts to get to the

bottom of the drug's chemical properties. Jack's attempts at noir cool then feel hamstrung by the squareness of home and work, so once again he tries at a character and falls short as he begins to play too many games at once. We witness this symbolic moment of mismatch manifested physically when Jack chases Winnie down to learn what she found out about Dylar. He complains that, "It felt strange to be running. I hadn't run in many years and didn't recognize my body in this new format, didn't recognize the world beneath my feet, hard-surfaced and abrupt" (186). Jack is apparently not very good at this game, unable to see himself as the chiseled detective type, unable to avoid his frumpy, boring reality: "I turned a corner and picked up speed, aware of floating bulk" (186). He cannot escape the "up, down, life, death" (186) that keeps him Jack.

As I have already stated, however, Jack would rather embrace hyper-reality, like his own real life cyberspace, which is exactly what he does when he elects to star in his own story of cuckolded husband seeking revenge. Jack becomes a lone gunman with the singular mission to kill Willie Mink—then take all of his Dylar. He sullies his own guest starring role as avenging hero with the exact anxiety in Babette's part that set "Dylarama" into motion: the unavoidable fear of death. Even so, Jack plays this part indulging in what Wilcox calls "B-movie heroics" (354) to relieve himself of self. While Wilcox insists that Jack's attempt at heroism is after "an epiphany of identity," I would counter that he seeks the virtual opposite, to become something else and actually achieve "the evacuation of the self" (357) that Wilcox believes Jack dreads. On the contrary, it is the "self" he wants nothing to do with, hence why he lights from role to role with increasingly escapist tendencies, as both Dickinson and Case try to do their avatars. We see Jack disassociate

himself from his mission as soon as he drives off toward it in someone else's car, i.e. his neighbors the Stovers' (DeLillo 302). On his way to killing, Jack feels the need to warm up with petty crime as he runs through several red lights and a toll gate (302-303). As his small crimes prepare him for attempted murder, Jack schemes that these acts will get him outside of himself: "This must be how people escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying. Simply stop obeying. Steal instead of buy, shoot instead of talk" (303). Jack presents these devil-may-care rejections of the appropriate and expected as the improvisations of a character, far beyond what he could dare to do as just himself—the (contradictory) literally enacted manifestation of anyone who has ever played a *Grand Theft Auto* game to its bloodiest potential but would never actually embark on serial killing and car stealing sprees.

Jack's casting as gunman actually splinters off into roles within roles as his feverish, farcical relation of the shootout only obscures him further. Once he arrives at the motel where Mink waits, Jack plays a few different personas as he vacillates between the philosophical and hard-boiled varieties of hero. His colder, more terse prose resembles "the voice-over style of the Raymond Chandler hero," according to Wilcox (354), or maybe the culprit Marlowe is looking to convict, as he lays out his plan: "Drive past the scene several times, park some distance from the scene, go back on foot, locate Mr. Gray under his real name or an alias, shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum pain, clear the weapon of prints, place the weapon in the victim's staticky hand..." (DeLillo 304). While this gruff gunslinger persona clearly indicates how much Jack places himself into the archetypes of genre entertainment, it is his more erudite half

that really shows him becoming a separate character as he describes his out-of-body experience of the entire episode, narrating that, “I watched myself take each separate step” (304). As Jack the narrator looks down upon himself playing these particular roles, he embellishes and gets carried away by his own language drunk on the imminent violence in the air, musing wildly that, “I knew the precise nature of events. I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a smashing intensity. Water fell in drops, surfaces gleamed” (305). As a novel divided into three very different parts and marked by departures into narrative pastiche of a variety of genres, I again emphasize that Wilcox and others like him miss the point when they take Jack at his word here. Wilcox states of this narrative swell that Jack “experiences with almost hallucinatory intensity the essential pulsating ‘thusness’ of reality, and in so doing believes himself to be experiencing an unmediated version of pure existence” (354). Here and all throughout his argument though, Wilcox gives DeLillo too much credit and Jack not enough. His thesis for the shootout scene is that DeLillo’s narration is so parodic that it undermines and mocks Jack’s attempt at heroism; but it is not just DeLillo’s narration—it functions as Jack’s character motivation too. More precisely: Jack’s *character’s* motivation. Even as the professor of his own invented major, Jack has never sounded more pretentious until this moment in the novel, so such a linguistic shift seems to be a narrative indication that Jack has embodied another character. Like Willie Mink—under the influence of Dylar’s side effects—not distinguishing words from the things they represent and ducking for cover when Jack just says, “Plunging aircraft” or “Hail of bullets” (DeLillo 309, 311), the literalistic effect of Jack’s narration creates the game in

which he plays the persona of this wordy gunman. Jack, as we see then, even hacks the way others should react to him when he exploits Mink's Dylar-induced literalism. He says, "Fusillade," (311) and Mink ducks and scrambles for the bathroom almost as if Jack asked for a gun and cyberspace gave him one. A less abstract way Jack hacks the shootout is the second chance he gets after Mink blacks out. He does not recall the showdown whatsoever, so Jack becomes another character entirely to him as Mink moans:

"Who shot me?" he said.

"You did."

"Who shot you?"

"You did. The gun is in your hand."

"What was the point I was trying to make?"

"You were out of control. You weren't responsible. I forgive you."

(314-315)

Unfortunately, that exchange should reveal that the game Jack set out to beat eventually beats him, for Jack's bullets and words both eventually let him down. First he does not successfully kill Willie Mink, and worse Mink shoots him in the wrist. Reality re-announces itself rudely and clearly defines the difference between words and things when Jack is wounded. Jack topples from his out-of-body pedestal of character privilege and crashes into his failed plan here: "The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff... What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I'd carried out my scheme?" (313). That "higher plane of

energy” where Jack played Jack carrying out his mission is shattered by this narrative twist. His character functioned by certain rules, and Mink cheated. This final straw embeds a glitch in the mission’s trajectory. Without the violent plot to dictate experience, Jack is left to react to reality, not follow the simulation of hyper-reality. He realizes with numb surprise that, “With the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing [Mink] for the first time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy” (313). With those principles back in play, he goes completely against character, and undoes his original plot to kill Willie Mink. He takes him to a hospital.

It is at the hospital where Jack and Willie are tended to, as the book convalesces toward its conclusion, that Jack is confronted with not only his failures in playing narrative, but the failures of narrative for him. As he casts himself in role after role in neglect of his actual self, he also assigns parts to those around him that his particular narrative requires they fulfill, usually in spite of their real selves that threaten to surprise and disappoint. Jack and his fragmented characters hypocritically want a representative fixity for his own supporting cast of people in his life. On the one hand, it comes as a screened surprise when Babette ends up on television. When Jack and his children see her on their set, nothing short of a rediscovery takes place:

The face on the screen was Babette’s... I’d seen her just an hour ago, eating eggs, but her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead... It was but wasn’t her... I tried to tell

myself it was only television whatever that was, however it worked—and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation.

(104-105)

Jack here muses that Babette seems simultaneously more real and more mythical all at once. If “to be is to be perceived,” as George Berkeley famously said (qtd. in Bourdieu 245), then Jack’s wife truly exists all over again for he and his family—not just as the Babette they thought they knew, but as that character in the television set. Wilcox says this is what happens in a world where “images, signs, and codes engulf objective reality; signs become more real than reality and stand in for the world they erase” (346-347). But as signs replace reality, we see that Jack’s conflicted statement that “It was but wasn’t her” actually applies to how he regularly treats Babette, televised or not. Jack has an idea of who his wife is and what that means, and he lets her know often. He constantly reassures her and more poignantly himself that “This is the point of Babette” in times when she worries that she is losing track of herself (DeLillo 193). Over time, the image of the Babette Jack claims to know replaces his actual wife—until she shatters that semblance in Part III. For it is decidedly not the “point of Babette” when Jack is shocked to discover she is sleeping with Willie Mink in exchange for drugs. Jack’s narrated notion of Babette runs into what he had not plotted for: infidelity. More to the “point of Babette,” maybe it should be *who* he had not plotted for. Clearly, Jack does not see the others he shares his reality with as fully realized people, but shallow representations, or the signs Wilcox states replace reality. He sees them as simply other actors in a game, and they have a particular “point.” Like Mink’s linguistic confusion when on Dylar, these

people with a “point” have a literal meaning that when “broken” mess up the code of Jack’s hyperworld. This revelation is what leads us back to the hospital, where again what Jack expects clashes against the glitch reality serves him. When he asks the German nun seeing to his bandages about church doctrine, she flatly states she does not actually believe any of it. Jack insists that she has to believe, but she cuts through his insistence and right to the core of his narrative maneuvering: “The nonbelievers need the believers... We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible... There is no truth without fools” (319). She has quickly pointed out another selfishness in Jack’s othering, to expect others to do what he should not have to. But more poignantly, if there is no truth without fools, then Jack’s scrambling from character to character only reveals his different versions of fool that are forced to face the truth of his lack of true self. Jack cannot determine others’ fixity any more than he can determine his own. With too many avatars to play all at once, his game is inherently broken.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AMERICAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

The final and most permeating strike against what his narrative game-play can do is the book's flagship obsession: death. This grim specter symbolically functions as more than just Jack's fear of eclipsed life. A more digital death is at play here as old mediums cannot contend with new, and its resulting fear frets at where the emerging mediations will depart from and lead toward. I mentioned in passing that DeLillo's working title for his novel was *The American Book of the Dead* (Osteen ix), and one does not have to read far to see how that title applies nearly as well as the title we have to come to know and overanalyze. Even more than buzzwords like simulacra and mediation, the subject of death is everywhere in DeLillo's novel. That may be because of those buzzwords.

According to Wilcox, "the symbolic mediations of contemporary society deprive the individual of an intimate relation with death, with the result that society is haunted by the fear of mortality" (353). Thanks to mediated roles then, no one faces his fear of death so everyone remains frightened of it. Barrett fittingly observes that "The only virgin land is death, and so the characters shuttle between simulations, afraid to face that which has not been mediated" (98). The narrated life is another of these simulations, for it mediates direct experience as a plot about a character, not oneself. For Jack and his games, the fact that virtually all video games offer a player the chance for multiple lives feels poignant. When one plays a video game, he or she can perform clumsily and die quickly with the first life, and then that same player can perform well and complete a certain level with the next: both lives (and deaths) belong to the same character and yet do not. Jack and his

various characters then may be said to be sampling lives by skirting close to death, either through Nyodene D. exposure or the risk of playing with guns. These characters are not the actual Jack but his extended avatars, the way he attempts to conceptualize death; because he never authentically faces death and in fact cannot without dying is exactly why he remains afraid of it. Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, offers that we can only understand death through the death of Others, which means never completely, for “the dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just ‘there alongside’” (281-282). We do not fully understand death then; more specifically, we do not want to understand it—about as much as anyone wants to accept inevitable death. Heidegger takes the phrase, “one dies,” and then explicates that stubbornness. Through his idea of the “they,” meaning everyone else but oneself, Heidegger suggests “that what gets reached, as it were, by death is the ‘they.’ One can say, “‘one dies,’” because everyone thinks “‘in no case is it I myself,’ for this one is the ‘nobody’” (297). He says then that the “they” can even convince one that this person who will one day die is not oneself. One takes on a part and convinces oneself, “The person left to confront death is not me.” This implication means that embracing the role of the Other others oneself, making hyper-reality all that much easier to bear than the truth of reality.

Even so, this desire to out-plot death through character roles is actually undone by the ever-present reality of demise. As I previously discussed, Jack as J.A.K. hints that, “‘All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots’” (DeLillo 26). DeLillo intriguingly revisits and expands this claim through the perspective of another completely

different character from his novel to follow, *Libra*, about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. As C.I.A. operative Win Everett masterminds a plot to almost kill the president with “a spectacular miss” (*Libra* 51), he frets that his idea may get away from him because, “There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot... The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death. A plot in fiction, he believed, is the way we localize the force of the death outside the book, play it off, contain it” (221). Nevertheless, the force of death remains impossible to contain. Narrative machination stands no chance for life’s improvisation, so the roles we inevitably inhabit have to be capable to authentically adapt. The reality of death is an unavoidable moot point not meant to send people scrambling to their mediated escape routes of past mediums and tired tropes.

It is the reality of life that must be accounted for, and not how Jack does it. This warning is especially applicable since he does not even die. Mark Osteen cleverly notes that Jack’s “plot... does not, after all, ‘move deathward.’ With this enigmatic, postmodernist conclusion, the novel moves beyond all the formulae it has employed” (ix). As a novel of pastiche and mediated plot sampling, this ending should have felt inevitable, for Jack’s final character of dying man has failed too, so the next genre prepares to be set up and Jack must present his next avatar to contest with it. But the novel ends here, and we are not privileged to see what happens next, suggesting that Jack may have finally run out of games to play. Up until the novel’s very end, he reacts to the scattering effect of technology’s impressive influx through character roles that do not embrace reality but splinter it, and maybe he is unable to play another avatar game to

fragment the new reality before him anymore. In the supermarket, he concludes his story with a glimpse at the chaos of the store's rearranged layout:

There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers. They walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go, clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they'd seen the Cream of Wheat. They see no reason for it, find no sense in it. (DeLillo 325-326)

This small consumer calamity becomes symbolic of a conflict between new media and the media user when Jack contrasts the holographic scanners against the tabloids. In the face of a new technology “which decodes the binary secret of every item, infallibly” (326), Jack and his fellow shoppers find a perverse comfort hiding in the grand, populist narrative of tabloid magazines, and the novel ends indulged in the character play that clearly marked much of its conflict. In fact, it is in many ways this ending that provides a key to rethinking the role of binary, digital technology throughout the book, technology that is certainly on Jack's mind, but which receives less attention than older media such as radio and television. This binary code, often hidden from view and eclipsed by other visual outputs, provides an undercurrent that explains much of Jack's behavior throughout the novel, even if he does not realize it, perhaps only detecting it in this final scene at the checkout scanner.

White noise, as a concept, refers to the overlapping of various wavelengths resulting in uniform indistinguishable sound. What Jack and maybe even DeLillo may not realize then is that the novel's “white noise” is not just the discernable mediums of

television, radio, etc. but the seemingly absent as well, that hum of digital code trying to break through. These new digital codes have arrived with the logic of games and networked connections and have taken up increasingly permanent residence in the cultural milieu of technology through which we can now analyze *White Noise*. Don DeLillo likely did not intend his novel to be so blessed with foresight, but the way our culture interacts with technology has been tellingly predicted by much of the plots and analyses within *White Noise* thirty years ago. 1984 was a year marked by change in technology and media, and much of these emerging technologies influenced the writing of this landmark text whether its author knew it or not; moreover, it has affected the way we can now look back on its cultural and critical legacy in 2014. By seeing where forms of new media started then and how those new media culturally dominate now, we now have a new way to read Jack, his character games, and why their failure matters to the story he tells in *White Noise*. By freeing DeLillo's novel from only looking back to older broadcast media and now seeing what it says by pointing it forward to broadband Internet and game studies, we gain a new critical understanding for the novel's persisting poignancy in a vastly different society further steeped in the image and trying to contend with new digital identities that continue to emerge in electracy. I wonder if re-seeing and re-hearing what lies within this text's "white noise" will any better prepare us for the story told beyond where Jack, retreated into the tabloids' snowy frequency of only present and past, can narrate.

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