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# "So Dead and Bald" Destroys the World

## A Psychological Critique of Object Metamorphosis in *Infinite Jest's* Game of Eschaton

by R. Christian Phillips  
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"Do not underestimate objects! . . . It is impossible to overstress this: do not underestimate objects" (Wallace 394). Even the most cursory reading of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* reveals the importance of objects to this work. Objects affect and vigorously direct all the characters throughout, from the tennis balls being continuously squeezed by students at the elite Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA) to the veil Joelle van Dyne wears to the plethora of drugs being consumed and, most importantly, to the cartridge of James O. Incandenza's final film, which is given the ultimate power of life and death over anyone unfortunate enough to view it. Yet, the twenty-two pages devoted to describing a single game of Eschaton--played by a group of pre-pubescent ETA students referred to as Combatants--most clearly expose how a simple object, or group of objects, can take on greater meaning and create devastating change for the individuals interacting with them. "A standout moment," this game is described as "a mash-up of Model U.N., tennis, and calculus . . . that ends in broken bones, tears, and hilarity" (Holub). A psychological critique of the objects used during the Eschaton game reveals their metamorphosis from mere objects into Things that actively affect the Combatants and ultimately destroy this game of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) while drastically altering the real world lives of all those involved.

The theory that any object has the ability to become something greater was first formalized by Bruno Latour in his 1991 book *We Have Never Been Modern*. Latour begins by showing how interconnected a single object can be to a multitude of subjects and actions--what he calls Hybrids:

Press the most innocent aerosol button and you'll be heading for the Antarctic, and from there to the University of California at Irvine, the mountain ranges of Lyon, the chemistry of inert gases, and then maybe to the United Nations, but this fragile thread will be broken into as many segments as there are pure disciplines. (2)

Pressing the button on an aerosol can to spray window cleaner on your bathroom mirror is more than just a simple action; it comes with a

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host of complications. First, that single action has a long history of chemical research and development in finding the right combination of gases and propellants to ensure the can and its contents work safely and competently every time, always doing its prescribed job. The next complication is its history since being placed on the market. Noticeable annual increases in the size of the ozone layer hole over the poles spurred research in many different places in the world, including the mountain ranges in France, UC-Irvine, and the permanent outposts in the Antarctic. Large amounts of research led to a conclusion placing significant blame on man-made pollution, with a significant amount coming from the use of inert gases in aerosol cans. This, in turn, led to UN and other governmental interests and actions concerning aerosol cans—their safe use, who can sell them, what gasses could still be used, how many years were to be allowed until they were completely banned, are the companies which sold them to be held financially or morally responsible, and many other questions. Yet, the various disciplines overseeing or critiquing each of these elements will only ever discuss their individual area of this complicated web.

This interconnectedness of objects to people, the world, and their power structures causes the objects themselves to morph into Things which “seem to assert their presence and power” (Brown 3). It is an illusion to think there is a neat division between humans and non-humans (or objects) with humans taking primary importance and the non-human being permanently relegated to the lowly status of a passive prop, an unimportant object just used to disclose information (Brown 4, 7-8, Jansen 58-9). Non-human objects become Things and redirect our lives regularly. When a paper cut forces you to stop reading and staunch the blood flow, that paper has become a Thing; your car becomes a Thing when it stops suddenly in the middle of the highway and violently changes the rest of your day, week, and, possibly, life; a bomb is just an object until it is armed and launched, becoming a violently disruptive and deadly Thing to everyone in its target area.

Once an object gains Thing status, its new-found importance creates a psychological pull which often generates an ethical dilemma. The ethical dilemma of Things is most commonly seen in the archaeological and cultural heritage worlds in deciding which objects are worth preserving and therefore showcasing in museums and heritage sites (Things), and which are only useful for gaining new information before being discarded (objects). UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, stipulates in the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage that the loss of cultural heritage items is a harmful loss to all people worldwide, enshrining a dominant prestige for specific objects which have gained internationally recognized Thing status (Sørensen 3). Thus, an action must be decided upon and carried out, whether

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consciously or unconsciously, when an object becomes a Thing. This is the essence of Thing Theory.

How a person reacts to the ethical dilemmas which occur throughout life is the foundation of psychoanalysis. If the basic question of psychology is “Why did you do that?” (Lynn 196), then any analysis must therefore include a critique of the Things which affect that person's actions and reactions (Hankins 332-3). In literature, finding the answers to this question, whether they are conscious or subconscious reactions by the characters, will indicate the underlying meaning being presented by the author. Without this understanding, the fairy tale becomes just another silly story, the morality tale becomes just another graphic anecdote, and Infinite Jest becomes just a giant paperweight.

Eschaton is a homemade game at ETA which “is the most complicated children's game anybody . . . ever heard of” (Wallace 322). For each game, five to six groups of Combatants are devised, designated as a conglomerate of countries, given an intricately decided number of tennis balls, and arranged over four tennis courts to correspond to their conglomerate's designated position on a flat wall map of earth. Each of the four hundred tennis balls, which are “so dead and bald they can't even be used for service drills anymore” (322), takes on the symbolic status of a five-megaton thermonuclear warhead. Tennis paraphernalia is strategically placed around the courts to represent other specific objects: T-shirts for major cities; different motel towels for major transportation, communications, and conventional power facilities; shorts for conventional forces and military command sites; black armbands for facilities with radioactive fallout potential; socks for various missile, antimissile, and bomb capable installations and forces; and shoes for submarines. During game play, the tennis ball warheads can only be launched as a lob with a tennis racquet; this actually creates additional practice in lobbing for the players, who become known for their lobbing precision. What complicates the game is the addition of convoluted mathematics in deciding who will launch a warhead at what target and how many points will be given based upon an extensive list of variables. Placed around the tennis courts, this tennis paraphernalia is still just a collection of objects, but they now have the potential to become Things.

The first object to gain Thing status is the tennis ball. By representing a five-megaton thermonuclear warhead, each “dead and bald” ball morphs into a destructive Thing when lobbed toward a target. Each piece of clothing, whether a T-shirt, a pair of shorts, a sock, or a shoe, also converts into a Thing once it becomes the decided target of that launched tennis ball. How these two objects interact—specifically the spatial proximity between the tennis ball and the piece of clothing when the ball lands—determines the convoluted mathematical computations which will then delineate the reactions of all the other Combatants. With this being the basic action of the “atavistic global-nuclear-conflict game,”

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play is logical, cautious, earnest, and deliberate, moving slowly and intently between these "staid, sober, humane, and judicious twelve-year-old world leaders, trying their best . . . not to let the agonizing weight of responsibility compromise their resolve to do what they must" (Wallace 327). In effect, the changed status of the tennis balls and the clothing has a psychologically calming effect on the otherwise active and highly athletic children.

When played following these established guidelines and combined with the elaborate mathematics created by Michael Pemulis, as outlined in the two page Note 123 located on page 1023, Eschaton becomes the diametric opposite to the regular life of its players. Eschaton is a group game played in an unhurried fashion which requires extensive calculations and deliberate thought. In their day-to-day life, these players are consumed by tennis, a fast-paced single person game of high skill and immediate, unconscious reaction. Daily practices revolve around a range of drills repeated ad nauseam until each of those drills become automatic muscle memory. An overall strategy is employed, but actions and reactions within the game must be instantaneous, occurring before any conscious thought or decision, if a player wants to win and advance to the next level of play. These prospective tennis champions rarely get the chance to deliberate about their next action and its possible consequences, nor do they get to play in groups against multiple opponents. Each game's Triggering Situation is hotly debated and the challenge of ensuring a realistic opening action preoccupies the participants' imaginations. For Eschaton devotees, their "quest to provide both an accurate geopolitical simulation and satisfying game play" has built "a game that is overwhelmingly rational" (Bresnan 61). In effect, Eschaton's slow and deliberate nature is how these children take a relaxing break from their hyper-athletic and physically exhausting world. However, to find a mental balance with the extreme focus necessary in attending and excelling at an elite tennis academy, the relaxation must itself be as complex and drawn-out as any tennis match.

Yet the truth is these scenarios are a "nostalgia for something that never happened [emphasis in text]. The political scenario of the game not only never occurred but is obviously completely fictional with regard to the political realities of . . . the Cold War" (Fest 135) or the world inhabited in the novel. None of the participants lived with the realities of a global nuclear threat; nevertheless, they long for the simplicity and perceived heroism implicit in the Cold War atomic consciousness (Grausam 326). Just like Dungeons and Dragons and other such games, Eschaton establishes a traditional quest scenario in a time and place where the rules and obligations are seen as rigid and set, as opposed to the flexibility and fluctuations of real life. Thus, boundaries are painstakingly erected between the real world of tennis courts littered with clothing and the simulated world of world leaders carefully feeling their

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way through the intricacies of global politics with the possibility of enacting full-scale global destruction.

On Interdependence Day, November 8, during the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, these boundaries collapsed and the two worlds collided. Representing the two world Superpowers of the Cold War, named SOVWAR for the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries and AMNAT for the US and North America, the game enters a crucial phase as these two Combatants confer with each other and Otis P. Lord, the game-master/statistician of record/God of the game who makes all the calculations and ultimate rulings. While everyone is standing around waiting for a ruling, the real world interjects into this simulated world as it begins to snow, gently at first. REDCHI lobs a warhead at INDDPAK, claiming a hotly disputed hit on Karachi. Looking for a way to minimize damage, INDDPAK's J. J. Penn further blurs the boundaries by claiming the real world snow has a simulated world effect. Multiple real world arguments break out between the players which quickly involve the spectators. Into this melee, Evan Ingersoll takes the audacious action of firing one of IRLIBSYR's "warheads" directly into the back of Ann Kittenplan's head:

Nothing moves. No Eschaton Combatant has ever intentionally struck another Combatant's physical person with a 5-megaton thermonuclear weapon. No matter how frayed players' nerves, it's never made a lick of sense. A Combatant's megatonnage is too precious to waste on personal attacks outside the map. It's been like this unspoken but very basic rule. (336)

The rigid boundaries have now completely collapsed, and there is no distinction between reality and the simulated world (Wallace 321-336).

This Eschaton game quickly moves from a simulated moment of global crisis to a very real moment of crisis. Valiant efforts are expended in keeping to the confines of the simulated world and stepping away from a real world eruption, but as expected, the four tennis courts become a free-for-all fight between children who spend all their days pitted against each other in pitched battles for dominance. Schoolyard rules spontaneously come into play with kids ganging up on the weaker Ingersoll before turning on each other and taking out personal grievances on each other. Punches are thrown, children are sobbing and calling for their mothers, faces are contorted with rage, kids are vomiting, blood is spilled, chaos reigns supreme. A series of spectacular interactions begin when Lord's speeding food cart, which carries the computer used to quickly compute the convoluted mathematics, is crashed into with "a noise like the historical sum of all cafeteria accidents everywhere" (Wallace 342). The resulting series of destruction reads like a Three Stooges routine, ultimately resulting in Lord crashing headfirst into the computer monitor's screen where he stays as his black socks are slowly revealed by gravity (Wallace 336-342).

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What begins as a simulated game of global atomic risk turns into a real crisis leading to the total destruction of the most important game piece (the computer) and a plethora of significant injuries to the participants. Two main questions arise: How did this happen? and Why did you (specifically Ingersoll and Kittenplan) do that? The simplest answer is that the objects became Things and effected an atypical psychological response. Using the Things around them in new ways, the participants in this specific game of Eschaton created a new reality which blended the simulation world with the real world.

Eschaton's history is revealed as two-fold yet cloaked in an air of mystery. No one knows who initially brought it to the school or raised it to a higher level from other eschaton games played by young schoolkids at recess on playgrounds around the world. By the time Pemulis became a devotee, the basic foundations were set; his contributions "helped make it way more compelling" by adding an "elegant complexity, combined with a dismissive-reenactment frisson and a complete disassociation from the realities of the present" (Wallace 322). In essence, what began as a childish way to blow off steam evolved into a close-quarters melding of military war games, Model UN, Mathletics, and tennis skills played by children with only a superficial understanding of the real world politics and consequences being simulated. Once a participant begins to have a deeper understanding of the serious nature of real world global nuclear annihilation, he or she moves into the realm of the spectator.

As previously explained, the game of Eschaton relies on certain objects becoming Things to the participants; four tennis courts become a real world representation of a flat world map (presumably without the nets), tennis balls become five-megaton thermonuclear warheads, and various pieces of clothing become a variety of targets for these warheads. Playing this game repeatedly throughout the year changes the participants' perceptions of these objects, most specifically the tennis balls. Most items return to being objects from being Things once the game is over, going back to being clothing worn for practice and matches and a place where practice and matches are held. However, the tennis balls--unusable for anything else--maintain their Thing status in the minds of these impressionable young warriors. It is easily conceivable that each participant has fantasized about the act which Ingersoll ultimately commits, breaking the unspoken rule and beaming another player with a forcibly direct hit. These children have barely matured past the age when Might Makes Right and Survival of the Fittest definitively ruled their social interactions with their peers, especially in unchaperoned group games.

What creates the confluence of events leading to the massive directional change in this specific game of Eschaton is the introduction of a new external Thing. REDCHI's attempt to quietly rack up additional unanswered points off of an INDPAK out of warheads while Lord, the God of the game, is focused elsewhere just as it begins to snow leads to

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Penn's attempted change of the snow's status from an object in the real world into a Thing in the simulated world. Bringing in an additional Thing results in a drastic change to the game itself, causing a new set of arguments over whether the snow should be included and if so, how it would fit into the calculations. These arguments and the threat of the game ending prematurely pushes Ingersoll over the proverbial edge into the one socially unacceptable physical action; he strikes another student. The pressures from the various Things combine with the pressures involved in attending an elite tennis academy and the grudges and resentments which always arise when highly focused people live, work, and compete in a confined space, especially when those people are children who have not been fully or properly equipped with the psychological tools necessary to deal with that type of intense extended situation.

Here is where the crucial turning point occurs; this is exactly the moment these participants have built the whole Eschaton game around. An unprovoked attack has been made by one Combatant against another. How will the attacked Combatant react? And what will the rest of the Combatants do? Kittenplan is forcibly restrained as various parties attempt to gain the upper hand. From outside the courts, Pemulis vehemently and loudly defends the order of what he perceives to be his creation, Eschaton in its current incarnation. Penn comes to the defense of his roommate, Ingersoll, and tries to keep the real action within the confines of the simulated action by claiming "the vaporized Ann Kittenplan is wearing several articles of gear worth mucho [points]" (Wallace 338). Lord furiously works the computer to find a game-approved action that covers the situation which everyone can then reasonably agree upon. LaMont Chu, Kittenplan's teammate, defends her right to not be hit during and within the confines of the game while trying to physically restrain his teammate from retaliation. None of this real world scrambling works. One small change, the snow possibly becoming a Thing, results in the real world eruption of the Mutually Assured Destruction being simulated in the game.

Kittenplan launches her retaliation as a mix of game play and real world action by shouting "well OK then if players can be targets then in that case" while grabbing a tennis ball and launching "a real screamer at Ingersoll's head" (Wallace 339). And the real world battle begins. No longer Combatants in a simulated game, these players return to the real world playground--and battlefield--rules of Survival of the Fittest and Might Makes Right. They all participate in taking out the weakest link, Ingersoll, battering him with balls until he is a bleeding mess on the ground. Penn and McKenna take this opportunity to avenge long-standing grudges by beginning to beam balls at Kittenplan, with one ball accidentally hitting Lord squarely in the chest. He then commits the final act, in both senses of the word, of Eschaton; "he flicks the red beanie's

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propeller, never before flicked, whose flicked spin heralds a worst-case-&-utterly-decontrolled-Armageddon-type situation" (Wallace 340).

All the action is now real world. Bodies are pummeled, kids are shoved, headlocks are given, punches are thrown, and mothers are called amidst the steadily falling snow. Although the balls and clothing have now lost their Thing status, the snow actually achieves full Thing status. Making "everything gauzy and terribly clear at the same time . . . so that the map's action seems stark and surreal" (Wallace 341), the snowfall has also slickened the surface of this battlefield. The climatic accident which spectacularly ends the warfare occurs because of the snow exerting its Thing power by obscuring views and making the tennis courts treacherous. The computer cart is barreled into, launching the computer into the air, and Lord hurdles the mess to attempt a heroic catch of the all-important computer, whose hard drive holds the rule book and all the calculations for Eschaton. However, the heavy snowfall exerts its power by obscuring Lord's view so that he trips over Chu, who is on his hands and knees throwing up, and goes flying. The computer smashes into the ground, shattering apart, and Lord crashes, face first, into the still working monitor screen. Eschaton in its current complex incarnation has just been doubly destroyed.

The words of Lyle, the locker room attendant, return with greater importance—"Do not underestimate objects!" (Wallace 394). In the ETA Eschaton game, an object no longer serving any other purpose (the "dead and bald" tennis ball) is given a new Thing status by representing an extremely dangerous and destructive weapon, while articles of clothing strategically placed around four tennis courts, themselves lifted to Thing status during the game as a stand-in for the world, gain their own Thing status by virtue of representing important targets. Raising a fourth object, the snow, to Thing status demolishes the boundaries between simulated Things and real-world Things, giving the players an excuse to bring this game of global destruction into their real world and physically avenge their own personal grudges and resentments. Through the pressure exerted by these Things on the human participants in Eschaton, the game itself undergoes its own eschatological arc; a real world battle brings this simulated world to its final Armageddon-type shuddering end with the annihilation of the computer and all its components. All the Combatants leave the battlefield as the walking wounded. Bleeding will need to be staunched, broken bones will have to be mended, stitches will be needed, and bruising will have to heal. Everyone's tennis season, and place in this elite academy, is now in jeopardy, if not already over. And the Things just return to being mere objects.

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