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A Response to White

Erin Conner

If someone were to have asked me in the spring of 2008 if I thought that I was providing an honest and reliable interpretation of my communication analysis model, I would have said yes. Several months removed from the speech community, my answer remains the same. This letter is my response to Dr. Leah White's criticisms of my interpretation of *I Lose, Therefore I Think: A Search for Contemplation Amid Wars of Push-Button Glare* by Shuen-shing Lee—the article that served as my communication analysis model (Conner, 2008). I hope that this letter provides a more in-depth justification of my interpretation. However, I recognize that I may have incorrectly, albeit innocently, interpreted the article. If the community ultimately decides that such a misinterpretation occurred, I contend that the misinterpretation can be attributed to flaws within the event and the speech community.

In 2007, Iraqi-American performance artist Wafaa Bilal unveiled an online interactive experience entitled *Domestic Tension* (Artner, 2007, para. 1). For one month, gaming enthusiasts could shoot Bilal with a paintball gun that had been programmed to fire when instructed to do so by a computer (Artner, 2007, para. 1-3). Bilal's goal was to draw a parallel between the game and the conflict in Iraq; gamers saw, first-hand, the damage that computerized weapons could cause (Artner, 2007, para. 10). After shooting Bilal, one group of guilt-ridden gamers refused to relinquish control of the gun; countless others apologized for their actions (Artner, 2007, para. 6). Thus, I asked the following question: how did participation in interactive violence encourage some players to adopt non-violent rhetoric? (Conner, 2008)

Finding a model was not easy. I started by looking at communication articles on performance art – the Theatre of the Oppressed, specifically. Because *Domestic Tension* was not scripted and because gamers did not have the traditional opportunity to demonstrate conflict avoidance, I decided that a Theatre of the Oppressed paradigm was inappropriate for the analysis (Artner, 2007). During the fall 2007 semester, I answered the research question using Gallagher and Zagacki's *Visibility and Rhetoric: Epiphanies and Transformations in the Life Photographs of the Selma Marches of 1965* (2007). Judges commented that, while the model applied nicely to the artifact, *Domestic Tension* relied on more than just visual rhetoric to convey its message. Moreover, a few judges noted that the model was very similar to the model used by Emily Winderman in the 2007 AFA-NIET finals; if memory serves me, Winderman used an article by Gallagher and Zagacki that applied their rhetorical framework to the paintings of Norman Rockwell (Winderman, 2007). Nonetheless, I felt compelled to find a new model over the holiday break. In her paper, Dr. White suggested that I could have used a model based on cognitive dissonance (White, 2008, p. 18). What's funny is that I seriously considered cognitive dissonance, but given its

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age and basis in social psychology, I figured that its use would be competitively disadvantageous. The sense of relief that I felt when I found Lee's article is indescribable, and I still believe that the article was appropriate for the analysis.

I justified the use of Lee's article by stating that it "attempts to explain why some violent video games cause players to act or think in a nonviolent way" (Conner, 2008). Dr. White contends that the article's main focus is on "the ways games influence gamers' critical reflections of the game industry itself" and "the qualities of art games which lead gamers to critical reflection of the violence present in games" (White, 2008, p. 14). Both of these elements are part of Lee's thesis (Lee, 2003, para. 1). I concede that Lee does not explicitly state that video games can cause players to act or think in a nonviolent way (Lee, 2003). However, the idea is implicit in the thesis and throughout the article; thus, I contend that my justification was valid; moreover, it avoided complicated gaming jargon. The thesis paragraph reads that some video games "offer alternative goals, such as meditative play or off-gaming engagement" (Lee, 2003, para. 1). I argue that the term "meditative play" means that players think critically while playing the game, and the term "off-gaming engagement" means that players act outside of the gaming realm. The idea that some video games can make players act or think in a certain way is further illustrated in the section on intentionally unwinnable games. Lee argues that these games create "off-gaming thinkers who wonder what sort of player the game would like him or her to become" and that "they're trying to make you think" (Lee, 2003, para. 11-12). In sum, my rhetorical question asked why *Domestic Tension* players responded with nonviolent rhetoric (Conner, 2008). The use of Lee's article was a valid means of answering that question because it discusses how video games produce both off-gaming engagement and critical thought, the latter of which can lead to action.

I argued that "games must produce feelings of guilt" in order to create non-violent thought or action (Conner, 2008). Dr. White is correct in arguing that Lee never once mentions the word "guilt" (White, 2008, para. 15). In retrospect, "guilt" is a word that was used to shorten the tagline. However, the word "guilt" describes the negative reflection that I alluded to when I argued that games must "use realistic elements, in order to force the player to consider the implications of his or her actions" (Conner, 2008). Lee clearly addresses this idea in his paper. Lee describes the game *Adam Killer*, in which players shoot at a photograph of a person (Lee, 2003, para. 24). He says that the game "frightens one in a certain way by conjuring up the memory of the Columbine shooters" making "fun-seekers uneasy with 'trigger happiness' since the shooting is distinct from that executed in confrontation with a horde of monsters or an army of anonymous pawns" (Lee, 2003, para. 24). Lee concludes that "the combination of real and surreal or artificial disrupts the player's gaming habitus and diverts him to the dimension of social critique" (Lee, 2003, para. 24). I'm guilty of condensing ideas to save time, but my argument is no different from Lee's complicated explanation.

Communication scholars may not agree with my interpretation, and I acknowledge the possibility that I may have inadvertently misinterpreted Lee's

article. However, I argue that such a misinterpretation is attributable to flaws within the event and the speech community.

First, communication analysis has some serious time issues which inevitably cause critical and relevant materials to be cut from the speaker's speech. Lee's article comes to thirteen Microsoft Word pages and has seven subsections (Lee, 2003). For competitive purposes, students are told to choose two or three main points to explain the article. Thus, students either cut pertinent ideas or try to combine ideas in a way that deviates from the author's original intention. Moreover, communication analysis, more so than any other event, encourages an unequal time distribution; students are told to spend more time on the implications than on the explanation and application. I could have included the parts of Lee's thesis that Dr. White highlighted, but that would have been competitively disadvantageous. To prevent misrepresentation, the community either has to extend the time limits or change the judging paradigm to focus less on implications. But something has to be done. If accuracy is ignored, misrepresentation will still occur. If too much emphasis is placed on accuracy, students will use short models that don't apply to their artifact.

My second argument is one that I am hesitant to make, but I feel as though it has to be made because I do not hear anyone else making it. I was very fortunate in that I found competitive success while on one of the smallest teams in the community. I realize the irony in what I'm about to say, but I don't think that communication analysis promotes equality amongst programs. First, the discipline of communication is expanding and many subcategories have been recognized, including business communication, political communication, and even computer gaming communication. A student from a larger program seemingly has a better opportunity to interpret his or her model correctly; there is a better chance that a larger school will have a faculty member that specializes in a communication subcategory. My undergraduate institution had two communication professors; both were forced to teach introductory and organizational communication courses, and neither had a clue about computer gaming communication.

Second, students from small programs are less likely to have coaches with communication backgrounds; thus, without guidance, students are more likely to misinterpret communication articles. My undergraduate institution had two coaches. Both were working towards their doctorate degrees in political science, and one does not touch individual events with a ten foot pole. That left me and our head coach to figure out if our interpretation was reliable, whereas students from larger programs had more opportunities for input. Finally, students from small programs are less likely to be able to create communication analysis speeches. Communication analysis requires students to follow a recipe more so than any other event. Neither my coach nor I knew how to write a communication analysis. For a semester, I tirelessly transcribed the speeches of Kashif Powell, Matthew Collie, and Christine Zani, among others. But even after I got the basic structure down, my coach and I had a laundry list of questions, including: does the model have to be communication-based; must the artifact have

been created with a communicative purpose in mind; do you have to have three tenets; may you combine several tenets to into one tenet; if the author did not make an argument clear, may you extrapolate on that argument? While my coach and I eventually found answers to many of these questions, I would imagine that there are students that limit themselves to familiar events because they don't know how to write a competitive communication analysis.

The creators of communication analysis had good intentions. As public speakers, we should strive to understand the foundations of communication. However, I don't know that those intentions are being met, and I believe that the event should be changed dramatically. First, communication majors aren't the only ones who participate in the event. I double majored in biology and political science; while I did my best to accurately represent the works of communication scholars, I never felt as comfortable in communication analysis as I did in extemporaneous speaking – an event in which I knew what I was talking about. Some would say that students who do not feel comfortable with the event should not participate in the event; it's a good argument, but it's not feasible in a community where students are pressured to participate in as many events as possible, so that their school wins sweepstakes awards and receives funding. Moreover, judges and audience members are not always familiar with complicated communication jargon; competitors end up being judged based on the uniqueness of their artifact, rather than on the power of their rhetorical arguments. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, communication continues to mesh with other disciplines. Often, a framework from another discipline would be more appropriate and more effective in answering the research question, but many judges refuse to consider non-communicative frameworks.

I think that a dramatic change is needed. While I am no longer part of the speech community, I hope that scholars use my suggestions to transform communication analysis into a more effective analytical forum. Perhaps we should drop the "communication" part and create an event called "artifact analysis." Students would use the same formula that is currently used in communication analysis; the only difference is that students would not be limited to the discipline of communication. For example, let's say that a peace agreement is signed between Israel and Palestine within the next month. A student would explain a political science theory, apply that theory to the peace agreement, and draw implications about the potential success of the agreement. This method would not solve all of the problems that I've discussed, but it mitigates some of the major ones. First, a major reason why misrepresentation happens is because students do not feel comfortable discussing communicative principles. This event would allow students to use artifacts and models from their major, making misinterpretation less likely. Additionally, students from smaller programs could choose disciplines in which their coaches or faculty members specialize, again decreasing the likelihood of misrepresentation. Furthermore, some judges and audience members would better comprehend the speeches presented. Some would argue that judges with backgrounds in communication would be less effective adjudicators, but I would argue that judges currently comprehend topics, from other disciplines, in events like informative and persuasion with little difficulty. Final-

ly, this event would call attention to social issues that would be difficult to present in other events. The example about the peace agreement could potentially be done as an informative, but most judges would not appreciate three speculative implications.

I have no hard feelings towards Dr. White, nor will I have hard feelings towards scholars who disagree with my interpretation. A contentious dialogue may be necessary to advance an event that meant a lot to me as a competitor and to further the interests of the speech community as a whole.

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