A Response to Mark Ulrich

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In "Seeing Is Believing: Using the Rhetoric of Virtual Reality to Persuade," Mark Ulrich explores how "virtual reality, media at its most vivid, is entering our lives and changing how we think and act through specific rhetorical techniques" (5). Ulrich grounds his theory of virtual rhetoric in his research at Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab and focuses on three different aspects of virtual reality: the background information, the effect on behavioral changes through experiments with head-mounted displays, and the potential applications of virtual rhetoric to influence users. He diplomatically describes virtual rhetoric as a "double-edged sword" because he recognizes the potential for both positive and negative effects (15). While Ulrich highlights a few implications of virtual reality, I would contend that he underestimates the potential exploitation of virtual rhetoric. The two main consequences of misuse Ulrich overlooks are first, the heightened possibility of dehumanizing effects on our society and second, the loss of our ability to discern between the real world and the virtual.

Ulrich successfully conveys the persuasiveness of virtual reality through specific case studies. Some experimenters have used virtual rhetoric to walk on planks over deep chasms and others have assisted pilots in training simulations. In one of the experiments, participants virtually cut down a tree with a chainsaw. This test group was more likely to use a conservative amount of napkins to clean up a spill than those participants who had simply read about the scene, indicating that the first group held a more conservationist viewpoint as a result of their virtual experience. Substantial evidence like this makes a statement about the effectiveness of virtual rhetoric as a persuasive tool.

Although Ulrich acknowledges that "experiences within immersive virtual environments are more powerful than mere imagination," he nevertheless underestimates the larger potential dangers of virtual rhetoric (12). The most overlooked point in this article is how persuasiveness can become lethal if a participant is not aware of the possible costs. What emotion will be evoked, for instance, when the action performed is no longer simply cutting down a tree but rather the action of cutting another person? In their article "Fear Appeals in Social Marketing: Strategic and Ethical Reasons for Concern," researchers Hastings, Stead, and Webb investigated the ethics of using marketing strategies that arouse anxiety in consumers. They discovered that "fear appeals include maladaptive responses such as chronic heightened anxiety, . . . complacency among those not directly targeted, and increased social inequity" (961). Just as appeals to fear in social marketing raised ethical concerns and prompted research, so too should virtual rhetoric, for the potential dangers of virtual rhetoric are at least as great.

Since the research on virtual reality is still limited, foundational studies, as Ulrich reports, began in the immersive nature of video games. Comparison of the evidence reveals that increased time spent consuming virtual rhetoric will have dehumanizing effects on our society. The recent Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Entertainment Merchant Association* focused on this issue. The Court overturned a California law that banned the sale of violent video games to children without parental supervision. The dissenting opinion by Justice Breyer explores the protective rights of par-

ents and supports the correlation between intense video games and violence. Justice Breyer concludes with a list of over seventy studies establishing the negative effects of increased play. He cites the American Psychological Association's resolution stating, "Comprehensive analysis of violent interactive video game research suggests such exposure . . . increases aggressive behavior, . . . aggressive thoughts . . . angry feelings, . . . decreases helpful behavior, and . . . increases physiological arousal" (15). These sources conclude that the greater physical engagement a child has in the game, the more emotionally and intellectually invested he or she will be.

Using virtual rhetoric, violence is no longer done purely through a controller but through our own actions. The body becomes a means of rhetorical persuasion to affect the mind. Debra Hawhee, author of "Rhetorics, Bodies, and Everyday Life," writes, "Rhetoric's very tendency to stretch or spill over into other arts or disciplines suggests what nearly everyone already knows—almost intuitively—that rhetoric isn't just a cerebral, conscious process, that it's messy, unpredictable, and that, at some level at least, the body is involved" (157). The body has immense control over chosen actions. If Hawhee is correct, the claims made by Ulrich become more alarming. The repercussions Ulrich outlines in his article are the use of emotional persuasion in advertising and politics, the assertion that privacy will no longer be possible and, most importantly, the inevitable changes to human behavior. Ulrich then hypothesizes, "[A]s younger generations are perhaps becoming desensitized, requiring more intense media experiences, the long-term efficacy of virtual rhetoric could be lessened" (16). He is accurate about how the vividness of the technology will continue to increase, but there is no evidence that participants will become desensitized. In fact, with virtual rhetoric, the body is immersed in the process and more significant results are likely to transpire.

Participants run the risk not only of stripping their sense of self in a virtual world, but they are also in danger of losing their ability to distinguish between the virtual and the real. This concern is not new to rhetoric. In the *Gorgias,* Plato raises the same question. He differentiates between the world of the real and the world of appearance. In the famous passage between 462 and 466, Plato emphasizes the important distinction between activities that promote a healthy body and soul (in the individual and the state) and activities that provide the mere appearance of health. Socrates states, "What about this? Do you think there is a good condition that seems to be, but is not? I mean, for instance, something of this sort: many seem to be in good bodily condition, whom one would not easily perceive not to be in a good condition, but a doctor and one of those skilled in gymnastic would . . . I say that such a thing exists both in body and in soul, which makes the body and the soul seem to be in good condition, but they nonetheless are not" (464a). Socrates is referring to rhetoric's place in ancient times when, in his opinion, oratory manipulated appearances rather than wrestling with the difficulties of reality. The fact that this work is still applicable after so many years is a testament to Plato's insight. In Plato's day, it was comparatively simple to discern between reality and facade, but rhetoric as he knew it still posed a threat to this distinction. Today, given the results found in Ulrich's article, it appears that the distinctions between the virtual world and the real world are even more tenuous; rhetoric is now more pervasive; and audiences, as participants in virtual reality, are even more impressionable.

The innovative bodily participation in virtual rhetoric is weakening the soul (as described by Plato) of present-day participants, and in this regard Ulrich understates the danger of virtual rhetoric. It has become not only an epistemological argument, but an axiological argument as well. Bailenson, who is mentioned throughout the entire article, writes with Blascovich in the introduction of their book, *Infinite Reality*, about "avatars [who] can be sources of trauma." They note the case of a girl who committed suicide after she learned that the boy with whom she interacted online was not who she thought he was in real life (5). This story exemplifies the harms produced when the world of appearance is confused with the world of reality. The virtual world through rhetoric is persuasive enough to regulate our real actions. One virtual world already being experienced is the

aptly named multiplayer game *Second Life*. This world allows players to create new identities called "avatars" and start a completely different way of living online. It permits a person who is not satisfied with his or her current situation to design an altered one. One article by Vanacker and Heider considers how "ethical significant harm can occur in virtual communities, and it is most likely to befall those who have a strong avatar attachment because they see their avatars as constitutive to their identity" (83). *Second Life* players can easily succumb to virtual pressures, and they, in turn, spill into everyday life.

Ulrich has increased our understanding of the world of virtual rhetoric. He does not, however, consider the two main concerns influencing our everyday life: dehumanization and the blurred line between the virtual world and the real. At the end of the article, Ulrich summarizes his research: "[I]mmersive reality will be used by organizations with questionable intentions regardless of our actions" (16). Participants still have the opportunity to be involved in a meaningful discussion about virtual reality. Advances in the field of virtual reality indicate a bright future for individual use of the technology. But they also foreshadow a grave danger if virtual reality becomes a communal experience in which participants are not carefully educated regarding the possible effects. Although I have no doubt this technology will be a game changer in society, citizens need to critically approach this virtual rhetoric with an analytical eye and an informed mind.

Works Cited

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