INTRODUCTION

An Introduction to the Special Issue: Expanding the Boundaries of Entertainment Research

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The experience of entertainment is arguably as old as human history. From stories told around campfires, to gladiator fights, to musical interludes, to radio dramas, and most recently to YouTube videos, entertainment is a central part of the human experience. Despite its integral role in our lives, entertainment is often associated with less-than-flattering connotations. Indeed, the mere mention of media entertainment may prime thoughts of mind-numbing diversion, banal laughter, sentimental melodrama, or simply empty procrastination.

Perhaps the frequent characterization of entertainment in hedonistic terms is a reflection of the word itself—with the root verb to entertain referring to the notion of providing pleasure, amusement, or diversion. Yet at the same time, to entertain has an additional meaning—referring to the act of contemplating, considering, or musing. Despite these dual meanings, though, entertainment is typically associated with the first, more pleasurable, albeit trivial, connotation. Given the association of entertainment with hedonically charged motivations, content, or outcomes, it is understandable that entertainment consumption is frequently referred to as a guilty pleasure—an activity that, although enjoyable, is not particularly enriching.

Just as popular characteristics of entertainment have focused on its pleasurable aspects, so too have foundational theories in media psychology (Bryant & Vorderer, 2006; Zillmann, 1985; Zillmann & Vorderer, 2000). Such a focus is understandable, as the landscape of media entertainment is arguably most heavily populated by pleasurable diversions including sitcoms, action thrillers, and reality programs. As a result, the theoretical understanding of entertainment experiences has been enriched by investigations of our use of these diversions for hedonic purposes (Zillmann,
and our enjoyment of entertainment portrayals that allow us to cheer for our favorite protagonists and delight in the demise of our despised villains (Zillmann, 1991; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977).

With this backdrop in mind, recent scholarship in entertainment psychology has been undergoing something of a theoretical metamorphosis. This growth of scholarship reflects not only a recognition of entertainment fare that does not quite fit the characterizations of entertainment as enjoyable or pleasurable but also an acknowledgment of the changing nature of entertainment itself brought about by technological developments. In short, as entertainment evolves and as researchers continue to broaden their understanding of its omnipresent and multifaceted role in our lives, entertainment scholarship has grown to encompass a wide range of viewer/user responses, a diversity of consequential variables that require our theoretical attention, and an extensive array of needs that entertainment may address.

This Special Issue of the Journal of Communication grew out of an appreciation of the development and expansion of entertainment scholarship that has built upon the insights provided by foundational theories. We believed that the time was ripe to take stock of the diversity of ways that researchers are pushing the boundaries of media theory that illuminate the breadth of entertainment’s reach in almost all facets of our media-saturated lives. It was our hope that by gathering together some of the most recent and insightful scholarship, we could provide a road map for future scholars who are interested in our continued efforts to broaden our understanding of entertainment experiences.

Themes represented in the Special Issue

A diversity of research approaches and questions are represented in the Special Issue, with each paper requiring that we expand our notion of how entertainment operates. Although every paper brings a unique and important insight into the equation, we believe there are at least four themes that run throughout these papers: a greater emphasis on cognitive components, a focus on well-being, a recognition of the ways that interactivity is fundamentally altering our experiences of entertainment, and a new-found appreciation of the importance of social interactions in entertainment offerings.

Cognitive processing of media entertainment

The relatively brief history of research in entertainment psychology has arguably focused most heavily on individuals’ affective responses over other types of reactions or experiences that may be equally relevant or consequential. Perhaps this focus is a reflection of the emphasis that has been placed on enjoyment as a predominant and desired response to entertainment. Similarly, the preoccupation with affective responses may reflect the tendency to label entertainment fare in terms of the types of emotions it elicits, such as sad films, comedies, thrillers, or horror. Yet as the papers
in this volume make evident, a focus on affect alone does not seem to be sufficient to cover the range of responses that individuals experience, either during the process of consumption itself, or in the outcomes that entertainment may have on individuals after the experience of entertainment has been completed. Specifically, several papers in this issue highlight the importance of individuals’ cognitive processing and responses to entertainment, thereby broadening entertainment scholarship in ways that illuminate both how we experience entertainment and how it may be influential in shaping our attitudes and interests.

The importance of cognitive processing is highlighted in Robert Lewis, Ron Tamborini, and René Weber’s article, “Testing a Dual-Process Model of Media Enjoyment and Appreciation.” Observing that many notable examples of entertainment depict stories of conflicting needs or feature morally complex situations, these authors provide an explanation of audience responses of appreciation versus enjoyment based on the appraisal of narratives that do or do not elicit cognitive conflict. Their experimental work, growing out of Tamborini’s (2012) model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME), offers compelling evidence of the importance of automatic versus deliberative processing in our experiences of entertainment. In so doing, it provides a means of understanding how and why viewers may come to value entertainment that may sometimes be uncomfortable, if not distressing.

Also based on the MIME (Tamborini, 2012) and focused on the intersection of media and morality is Allison Eden, Ron Tamborini, Matthew Grizzard, Robert Lewis, René Weber, and Sujay Prabhu’s paper, “Repeated Exposure to Narrative Entertainment and the Salience of Moral Intuitions.” These authors again make evident the importance of cognitive responses to entertainment, showing that repeated viewing of narratives depicting given moral standards can make these standards more salient or chronically accessible. Their work comes at a particularly important and interesting time in entertainment history in which the morality of notable characters forms the basis of many popular narratives (e.g., *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad*).

The importance of the cognitive processing of entertainment messages also takes center stage in Anne Bartsch and Frank Schneider’s article, “Entertainment and Politics Revisited: How Nonescapist Forms of Entertainment Can Stimulate Political Interest and Information Seeking.” Similar to other papers in this volume, Bartsch and Schneider recognize a distinction between more pleasurable or hedonistic consumption and more meaningful or eudaimonic consumption. However, these authors also argue that aspects of the affective state associated with eudaimonic consumption serve to enhance more elaborate processing and reflection. In a masterful turn, these authors then present evidence that unlike more “escapist” entertainment that may ultimately lead to passivity, more meaningful entertainment may encourage greater reflection and interest in political issues that are part of the narrative.

**Entertainment and well-being**

Whereas extant research has recognized that entertainment can be “good” in terms of being pleasurable, the idea that entertainment can be good for its consumers has
not played a central role in much theorizing. However, common characterizations of media entertainment often imply (if not state outright) the more therapeutic potentials for entertainment, including providing us with the opportunity to dream big dreams, to work through life’s troubling challenges, or to even have a “good cry.” Likewise, a growing number of scholars are now exploring the multitude of ways that entertainment can provide pleasurable, meaningful, and enriching experiences that ultimately serve to enhance our feelings of well-being. The papers in the Special Issue provide excellent examples of such scholarship.

Diana Reieger, Leonard Reinecke, Lena Frischlich, and Gary Bente’s research recognizes that many forms of entertainment can ultimately serve to assist in our needs for recovery when stressful events or experiences deplete our cognitive or physical resources. However, their paper, “Media Entertainment and Well-Being – Linking Hedonic and Eudaimonic Entertainment Experience to Media-Induced Recovery and Vitality,” draws our attention to the different mechanisms that play a role in media-induced recovery. Their research shows that hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment experiences serve to fulfill different needs, with need-fulfillment resulting from both types of experiences working to enhance feelings of vitality. Their research serves as a useful reminder of the importance of a close examination of the mechanisms that ultimately make entertainment a fulfilling experience on a multitude of levels.

When thinking of entertainment, we often envision thoughts of losing ourselves in the lives and adventures of the characters in a narrative. Michael Slater, Benjamin Johnson, Jonathan Cohen, Maria Leonora Comello, and David Ewoldsen situate the self as a central component of the entertainment experience. Their paper, “Temporarily Expanding the Boundaries of the Self: Motivations for Entering the Story World and Implications for Narrative Effects,” argues that entertainment provides the opportunity to relieve ourselves of the burdens of self-regulation and identity management. Rather than “losing oneself” in the sense of forgetting or abandoning the self, these authors argue that entertainment provides the opportunity to expand and free ourselves from our individual identities that may be self-limiting. These authors provide a rich set of hypotheses that follow from their argument that will undoubtedly inspire many lines of future investigation.

These two articles lead us to think about how media can promote health, vitality, and life balance. But, of course, well-being also involves remaining vigilant to threats in our environment. Empirical research identifies contempt, anger, and disgust (CAD) as three emotional reactions to violations of and threats to our moral code, and, in turn, our well-being. Although the so-called CAD hypothesis (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999) has inspired work in the field of moral psychology for more than a decade, media psychologists have not been so inspired. In the article “Captivated and Grossed Out: An Examination of Processing Core and Sociomoral Disgusts in Entertainment Media,” Bridget Rubenking and Annie Lang begin to address this oversight by examining different psychophysiological responses to disgusting scenes in entertainment. As predicted, different elicitors of disgust lead to different emotional and
cognitive reactions, with differing impacts on memory. Their work builds on and adds another dimension to the small-but-growing set of studies on media entertainment and moral emotions.

**Interactive entertainment experiences**

Another theme running through the Special Issue relates to the role of interactivity in the entertainment experience. What exactly is meant by the term *interactivity* has been the matter of intense discussion and debate for some time. One important and oft-cited characteristic is the extent to which an audience member is able to select and modify content during the entertainment experience. From this perspective, interactivity is nothing particularly new: Radio listeners for more than half a century have successfully requested certain songs be played; Magnavox introduced the first in-home video game console more than 40 years ago; and two decades have passed since the Cambridge Digital Interactive Television Trial pioneered video on-demand services. Today, our interactive options are seemingly endless from real-time texting a vote for our favorite “dancing star” to feverishly matching and “crushing” colorful pieces of virtual candy. Previous research explains that we find such experiences entertaining as they offer us, among other things, opportunity to satisfy the intrinsic needs of autonomy and competence (e.g., Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010), enter the pleasurable mental state of flow (e.g., Sherry, 2004), engage with narratives and characters (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008), and socialize with others (e.g., Ravaja et al., 2006). As alluded to above, these perspectives have tended to focus on the hedonic motivations for and effects of interactive media content. But given the increasing ways that audiences can and are interacting with these contents, and given the vast array and never-ending stream of interactive content available, media scholars must better grapple with how these shifts in technology affect the entertainment experience.

We think that the Special Issue contains two excellent examples of scholars wrestling with some of these issues. In their article “Interactive Narratives: Processes and Outcomes in User-Directed Stories,” Melanie Green and Keenan Jenkins offer new insight into text-based narratives that provide readers the opportunity to make key plot decisions. Such narratives have been around for several decades but have recently been used in entertainment-education efforts to influence health attitudes and behaviors. The authors offer a conceptual model—based on existing user- and narrative-based theories and concepts—that helps to illuminate under what conditions such narratives should be more persuasive, entertaining, and meaningful. The model can serve as a guide for both basic and applied researchers who might seek to leverage interactive narratives for specific persuasive purposes.

A second example is offered by Malte Elson, Johannes Breuer, James Ivory, and Thorsten Quandt. In “More Than Stories With Buttons: Narrative, Mechanics, and Context as Determinants of Player Experience in Digital Games,” the authors turn the reader’s attention to an arguably more familiar interactive content: digital games.
As noted, previous research has explained how and why we find pleasure playing these games. However, few scholars have attempted to examine how playing digital games might permit us to experience meaningfulness and cultivate a deeper appreciate for life. Elson and his colleagues illuminate why this might be the case: Examining these issues can be quite challenging given the unique characteristics of the interactive digital game experience. To tackle this challenge, the authors rely on the integrated model of player experience (IMP; Elson, Breuer, & Quandt, 2014) to explore both game (e.g., narrative and mechanics) and user (e.g., identity and social context) features that must be considered when developing the novel and innovative approaches necessary for examining digital game play as a meaningful practice.

**Entertainment and social interaction**

A final theme connecting several articles in this volume is an issue that media and entertainment psychologists have at times ignored in their work: the social aspects of the entertainment experience. Most readers are familiar with the ongoing cultural discussion about how media technologies are tearing (or at least picking) at the social fabric of society; Putnam’s (2000) *Bowling Alone*, and to a lesser degree Turkle’s (2011) *Alone Together*, stand as extended arguments for this position. For the most part, entertainment—which serves as a key motivation for much of this “destructive” media use—is generally overlooked in these discussions. As a result, the function and potentially beneficial effects of entertainment are also ignored. Of course, our goal here is not to offer an apology for the role of entertainment in society. But we do think that media scholars can offer tremendous insight in support of (or opposition to) those arguments. At a minimum, media scholars can attend more to the ways that entertainment is experienced, discussed, recreated, and shared by people across time and space, placing the social aspects of entertainment more front and center.

Without a doubt, the sociality of entertainment can take many forms. The social interaction that takes place during digital gaming is one such form. Elson and his colleagues, in “More Than Stories With Buttons,” argue that the social context of play might be a key factor in facilitating and promoting a meaningful media experience through the need to build and exchange social capital, develop mutually beneficial alliances, and foster cooperation and compromise. In these ways, gaming might promote social binding and connectedness. Similar ideas are also faintly echoed by Eden and her colleagues (i.e., entertainment can make moral domains of care and fairness more salient).

The article “Entertainment 2.0? The Role of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Need Satisfaction for the Enjoyment of Facebook Use” by Leonard Reinecke, Peter Vorderer, and Katharina Knop offers a novel approach to understanding the sociality of entertainment by suggesting that social interaction through media is entertaining. The authors offer and test an initial theory-driven model of Facebook use as entertainment, with use motivated by intrinsic needs in ways similar to more traditional media forms. Of particular interest, the researchers found that social pressure (as a form of extrinsic
motivation) also motivated Facebook use in complex but fascinating ways. Their work serves as a shining example of how entertainment scholars can continue to consider and account for the contribution of sociality to the entertainment experience.

Concluding thoughts

In his presidential address at the 53rd Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Jennings Bryant (2004) outlined what he saw as three key challenges for the communication discipline. The first among them was the “legitimization and enhancement of entertainment theory” (p. 392). We believe that scholars have heeded this call and that the papers in the Special Issue illustrate the enthusiasm that the discipline has for engaging this challenge. We hope that readers will both enjoy and appreciate these essays and the ideas represented herein.

References


