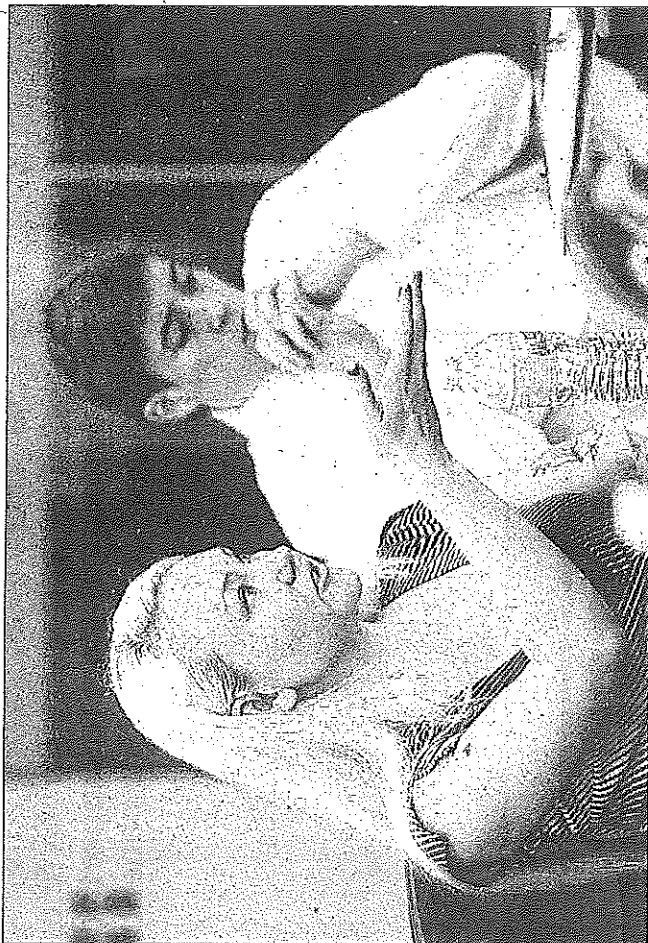


# Are movies, TV, video games causing more bloodshed?

## Our roundtable participants



Nicole Richter and Joe Gieringer participate in a round-table discussion on whether there is a connection between violence and video games, television programs and movies. LISA POWELL / STAFF



**Glenn Battishill**

■ Glenn Battishill, a recent Ashland University graduate from Butler County, who plays games and writes about film.



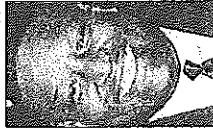
**Brad Bushman**

■ Brad Bushman, an Ohio State University professor of communications and psychology who has researched the effects of video games.



**Jim Wiener**

■ Jim Wiener, director of broadcast services for Public Media Connect — ThinkTV and WCET.



**William Roberts**

■ The Rev. William Roberts, pastor of Upshaw AME Church in Dayton. Moderators: Michael Williams, Ron Rollins.



**Nicole Richter**

■ Nicole Richter, associate professor of motion pictures at Wright State University.



**Joe Gieringer**

■ Joe Gieringer, a Miami University student who plays games and writes about film.

*What are we to think of the amount of violence that is huge part of America's popular culture? Does the violence that drives video games, movies and TV shows actually affect us, or does it pass through our senses without any impact? As another summer of violent Hollywood movies nears its end, and in a year when gun-rights issues are still being debated across the nation, we convened a conversation on violence and culture. We invited to our round table several young people who enjoy video games, a pair of academics who study movies and game culture, a public-television programmer and a local pastor. Their conversation was far-ranging and insightful; we share an edited, condensed version today.*

**Moderator:** A good place to start might be with Brad's research.

**Brad Bushman:** We recently did a comparative review of all the studies ever published on violent video-game effects, and it showed violent games increase aggressive thoughts, angry feelings and physical arousal symptoms, such as blood pressure and heart rate. There's also a decrease in feelings of empathy and compassion for others.

**Moderator:** Do you think increased violence in popular culture is having a coarsening effect in society?

**Nicole Richter:** Yes, and I think the link is different based on what type of popular culture you're talking about. Video games are fascinating because the player is forced to respond as quickly as possible to be effective, and that obliterates the kind of critical thinking that makes you consider the consequences of your actions. So it's different from film, which is a more removed experience where you aren't forced to react. Film is more complex, and there are lots of theories and studies about the effects of violence in

movies on society. Whether the effects are equal for everyone who watches a film is unknown, for one thing. But also in film, there are uses of violence that force us to question violence in society, and some filmmakers use violence to make us think about violence and its effects — so not all violence in film has a negative effect.

**Bushman:** I agree. There are three important differences between film and video games — one is active involvement. We learn more when we're actively involved, like a flight simulator. Second, if you watch a violent program or film, you may identify with it or you may not, but in a violent video game, you have no choice, because you are linked to the character; you assume the personality of the killer. That is important. The third is reinforcement — film or TV aren't directly reinforced, but with video games you get more points the more you kill, which is how you advance. We know people are more likely to repeat behavior they're rewarded for.

**Jim Wiener:** I think there is a coarsening, like with anything else you could consider a vice — drinking, pornography. You're a healthier society when you have less of those things. We do have these periodic acts of horrific violence, but how much is violence in media contributing to it? Often you're dealing with people in those cases who

are predisposed to the violence, which is why they're seeking out violent games.

**William Roberts:** There is a correlation between the violence and where our culture is headed — the media and video games and things of that nature. In what I do, working with the community and working with males, it continues to perpetuate a situation where it denigrates the females in society. It desensitizes people to violence and it begins to set some norms for those who don't have

other influences that they, in turn, incorporate into their lives. The output is violence. And there seems to be a disconnect from moral and cultural values that have existed for many

centuries. It's been happening over the course of years to lead to this point. I'm not going to say it's all on the music and violence, but it's been a quiet storm brewing. We could look to a number of areas where our values and morals have corroded. We could start with even politicians and society in general.

**Glenn Battishill:** I've played video games my whole life, and I understand there's a correlation between games and behaving more aggressively, but I think there's the same link for watching a movie or attending a sporting event or listening to loud music: They all get your blood pumping and you get excited. It's not exclusive to video games, but it's true for lots of things in our society. And also, there is a big difference between aggressive and violent behavior.

**Bushman:** That's true, but research has shown that video games are more likely to cause it than, say, TV programs or movies. You can show subjects "X-Men" the game and "X-Men" the movie, and you see more aggressive behavior after the game.

**Joe Gieringer:** I'm 22, and I've grown up with video games. I do think being in control of the game does affect how you personalize it and how you view yourself as a violent character, and violent behavior is awarded with bonus points. My parents moderated my playing time. I had to go with in the industry rating standards. Your home situation definitely affects how you grow up with games, and a lot comes down to parental guidance.

**Moderator:** A lot has been written about Hollywood's obsession in movies and posters with big guns. Does anyone see a connection between that and the nation's increasing demand for guns and ammunition?

**Richter:** Of course. The point of a film is to make something look glamorous, and increase your desire for it. Even if you make a villain cool, people will identify with them, even if they turn out badly at the end. I mean, look at "Scarface." It's the erotification of violence; certainly there's a connection. There's a gender component here, too — women are most often the victims of the crimes in shows like "CSI." The unquestioned use of violence against a woman to drive a narrative is very problematic.

**Roberts:** There's some correlation but I think it's a systemic issue — in terms of how guns are being marketed, the fear that's being created and then the availability of guns. It's a mix that comes together to negatively affect some communities even more than others. But I think the country as a whole is almost back to the wild, wild West days. We left those days for a reason. So, as I continue to see the gun violence swell, I see laws that were put in place are now being relaxed. ... Guns seem to be plentiful, even in communities where people don't have money to get other things they need. There seems to be no one who can speak out against these weapons because there are millions of dollars put behind pushing them forward.

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It's a difficult time right now. We've become a society addicted to violence. Anyone who knows about addiction knows there's a progression that happens. So therefore, we want more violence, more realistic violence. The better the violence, the more we get excited. We're addicted - which continues to take it to new levels. We've got a TV show about a serial killer, and they've almost normalized it. I'm sure there's someone out there - the way the media travels - who's about to mimic this character, Dexter. It's frightening.

**Richter:** Another thing to consider is that America's film rating system is very problematic. A film can get a PG or PG-13 with violence if it's cartoon-based; so we're teaching kids violence is funny and has no real-world impact. There's no actual blood in those films, so we aren't teaching kids that violence has any consequences. The rating system also promotes a lot of censorship against sexuality, but allows for all kinds of violence. I'd like to see that change. In Europe, film violence is more heavily controlled.

**Bushman:** In Amsterdam, movie ratings aren't self-assigned by the industry, but are determined by researchers in child development, with the idea of protecting children and informing parents. And they're very easy to un-

derstand - not like the American alphabet soup of ratings that we have here. Parents don't understand the ratings and the industry doesn't care. Its goal isn't to protect kids, but to make money.

**Wiener:** We've pretty much removed smoking from movies, but big guns not so much. The other violent convention lately is zombies - they're just dead people, so you can do all kinds of graphic violence to them and it doesn't count, because they're not human. If you've seen cable shows like "The Walking Dead," there is really shockingly graphic violence.

**Richter:** But I'd argue it affects us on some unconscious level. Zombies are a metaphor for some group of people who have been dehumanized in some way, that are different from us, and that is where you see real-world implications. There is often a racial or ethnic subtext.

**Battishill:** It's hard to find a TV show or movie that doesn't contain some violence, and I would agree that TV doesn't treat violence and sexuality equally, and that it must have an effect on kids. On "CSI," you can see a head graphically bashed in by a garden tool but, if there is a sex scene, it's in the dark and the shadows. You do become desensitized.

**Moderator:** So, it seems as though popular entertainment is an ever-escalating series of stunts, destruction and violence. We're a long way from "Psycho" in 1960. Where are we headed, as they try to raise the ante on what we just saw?

**Gieringer:** We'll have to see where it goes - what can an industry put out that shocks audiences more than last year? At some point, you'll reach a line, but personally I'm not sure where it is, when you have 1,000 new movies out a year and more of a violent nature.

**Battishill:** I think you have an escalation of violence, but not an escalation of the consequences and morality behind it. Some game makers are starting to recontextualize the violence to make you think through the choices you make as you play, and to rehumanize the enemies. Also, you need to go case by case and evaluate games individually, and not just lump them together. Games have sparked me to think about issues I never would have thought about, and have

**Wiener:** There's more violence, but it's like empty calories, with all the special effects diminishing the impact. You be-

come really bored. "Psycho" still has real impact - because it's personal, one on one; we're all in that shower. There are real people in the movie you can relate to. Today's violence is all very fantastical. Half a city gets destroyed, but you have no reaction at all. Again, no consequences.

**Richter:** And it's worth mentioning that (Alfred) Hitchcock didn't actually show the violence; he just suggested it, using the artistic aspects of cinema to create meaning in the film. He was always meditating on our complicity in the violence we were watching; he forced us to confront our own violent natures. It was more ethical. Now it's all lost for profit. Bodies get ripped open, and I just find it boring. I'm bored with CGI and no human connection. I'd prefer a ride at a carnival.

**Moderator:** So can we step back?

**Roberts:** I don't think it's too late to turn things around. But it's going to take a holistic effort by the community, and I'm not sure who's going to have to be killed before people in power take a serious look at this. As long as we have lobbyists running everything, we're never going to make a dent on the major issues that are affecting us as a country. Locally, there are some good things happening but, as long as we never challenge the gun laws, we're going to continue to have a problem.

**Bushman:** We'll probably have more Sandy Hooks. American culture is very violent, and we have more guns per capita than any other country in the world. We need to teach children to become more intelligent consumers of media.

**Battishill:** A key problem society is facing is parents using video games and TV as baby sitters, and not regulating what their kids are consuming. I was in line at a video store and a dad behind me was buying his kid an M-rated game because it's what he wanted for his birthday.

**Roberts:** Many parents just don't have the wherewithal - with having to work all the time and trying to make ends meet. Underlying quite a bit of this is just poverty. When people are unable to earn a real living wage and sustain a family ... they're doing the best they can. But the parent needs to be involved and try to have reality checks with the child - if they're going to permit them to watch violent acts.

**Bushman:** And in this digital age, it's easy for parents find out what's in the game and movies. You just have to read about the ratings, go to YouTube and watch.

**Richter:** We have to be careful, though, and not to put all the reasons and fixes on the individual. Big multinational corporations are profiting on producing this violence, and they need to be held accountable.

**Battishill:** There is a bit of a misconception about what video games are becoming and can be. Many parents see them as just a toy, but you're interfacing with the virtual world; there are so many things we can teach people with them. In the classroom, you're more engaged than just being told to open your book to page 13. Games today are so realistic. And again, today a lot of companies are trying to push a moral lesson with their games. I think it's developing.

**Wiener:** Maybe we'll hit some sort of watershed moment, like we did as a society with traffic deaths, and said, "This is insane" - and we forced car makers to make safer cars. With all these mass shootings, and all the guns in society, it's like a hunger that some people have - but why isn't it sated? Maybe this is a cycle that will play itself out.

**Roberts:** Usually things go so far and then they bottom out. I don't know who has to get affected by it but, when the right people get affected, things seem to cease and reverse. Unfortunately, at this point, the profits continue to outweigh lives.