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FROM THE VICTORIAN ERA TO THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT:

Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games

THEMATIC SECTION

"Death Is a Mercy": The American Monomyth of the Superhero in 2005's *The Punisher* Video Game

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ABSTRACT: Debuting in 1974, the creation of Marvel Comics' character of the Punisher was influenced by vigilante violence fiction, such as Don Pendleton's *The Executioner* book series (1969 onwards). In the early 2000s, the character had a resurgence in popularity, kickstarted by the critically acclaimed comic book run from Garth Ennis, Steve Dillon and other collaborators. This popularity reached its peak in 2004 with the release of *The Punisher*, a film directed by Jonathan Hensleigh and starring Thomas Jane. The following year, a video game of the same name was released by the studio Volition, which saw Jane reprising the title role and Ennis being credited as co-writer. After a brief history of the character's creation and its first high point of transmedia popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this article analyses the media texts of the Punisher between 2000

RESUMO: Estreando em 1974, a criação da personagem *The Punisher*, da Marvel Comics, foi influenciada pela ficção de violência vigilante, como a série de livros *O Carrasco*, de Don Pendleton (publicada a partir de 1969). No início dos anos 2000, a popularidade da personagem ressurgiu, impulsionada pela série gráfica aclamada pela crítica, de Garth Ennis, Steve Dillon e outros colaboradores. Essa popularidade atingiu o seu auge em 2004 com o lançamento de *The Punisher*, filme realizado por Jonathan Hensleigh e interpretado por Thomas Jane. No ano seguinte, o lançamento de um videojogo homónimo pelo estúdio Volition, que viu Jane assumir o papel principal e Ennis creditado como coargumentista. Após uma nota breve sobre a criação da personagem e o seu primeiro momento de grande popularidade transmedia no final dos anos

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and 2005, culminating in Volition's video game. To do so, I will draw on the conceptual framework developed by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett in *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), specifically the urban vigilante variant of that myth, as well as the transmedia interplay between the Punisher texts. While Garth Ennis' comics from the early 2000s comment on the mythic paradigm in a postmodern way and may even criticise the processes on which it operates, the 2004 film and the 2005 video game reinforce it.

KEYWORDS: The Punisher, Transmedia, Shooter video games, American Monomyth, Superheroes.

1980 e início dos anos 1990, este artigo analisa os textos transmediáticos de The Punisher entre 2000 e 2005, culminando no videojogo Volition. Para tal, recorrer-se-á ao aparato conceptual desenvolvido por John Shelton Lawrence e Robert Jewett em *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), à variante vigilante urbana desse mito e à interação transmedia dos textos de *The Punisher*. Enquanto romances gráficos de Garth Ennis do início dos anos 2000 comentam o paradigma mítico de forma pós-moderna e até criticam os processos por meio dos quais ele opera, o filme de 2004 e o videojogo de 2005 parecem reforçá-lo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: The Punisher, Transmedia, Jogos de tiro, Monomito Americano, Super-heróis.

INTRODUCTION

The narratives of the Marvel Comics character the Punisher are inscribed within the tradition of the urban vigilante subgenre of crime fiction, which itself is part of what John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett called the American Monomyth (2002, 107). The third-person shooter video game *The Punisher* (Volition, 2005) has become the most favoured video game incarnation of the character among fans.[1] How are the American Monomyth's characteristics represented in Volition's *The Punisher* in terms of their reinforcement or subversion? To answer this question, I first explain Lawrence and Jewett's theoretical framework and their application of it to urban vigilante fictions. Following this, I provide a brief history of the Punisher's publication and transmedia presence until the early 2000s, when the character's second production cycle begins. Finally, I analyse Punisher products of the 2000-2005 period in relation to their transmedia interplay and their representations of the American Monomyth, with a particular focus on Volition's video game.

THE AMERICAN MONOMYTH, *DEATH WISH* AND GOLDEN VIOLENCE

In *The American Monomyth* (1977), Jewett and Lawrence introduced the eponymous concept as a mythic structure which they saw as particular to the narratives and idiosyncrasies of the United States, differentiating it from Joseph Campbell's classic and universal Monomyth from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/2004). Campbell's Monomyth is one of initiation: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 1949/2004, 28).

Alternatively, the American Monomyth is one of redemption, where the hero saves an Edenic community from outside evil forces:

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 6)

With *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), Lawrence and Jewett expanded upon their concept of the American Monomyth, applying it to the analysis of various pop culture texts and historical events of the U.S. and offering different variants of the myth. One of the versions they analyse is that of the vigilante in the urban wilderness who brings justice with violence that the official institutions are either unwilling or unable to. This "golden violence", a term they coin in reference to a quote from a *Dick Tracy* comic strip from the day following Robert Kennedy's assassination, which reads "VIOLENCE IS GOLDEN WHEN IT'S USED TO PUT DOWN EVIL" (2002, 106), is key in the urban vigilante trope, of which they find its archetypal manifestation in the film *Death Wish* (1974), directed by Michael Winner. In it, a middle-aged architect by the name of Paul Kersey, played by Charles Bronson, begins a killing spree of street criminals after his wife is murdered and his daughter is raped by stereotypical lowlifes in his upper-class apartment. This urban vigilante story trope takes the narrative of the mythical Old West and updates it to the modern setting of the big city, a place of danger similar to the wilderness of Old Frontier stories.

This variant of the American hero myth has its roots in the Puritan colonists' time and their view of the United States. For them, the wilderness was a source of danger and evil, temptation and threat, stemming both from nature's menaces as well as the violent conflicts they had with the native Americans. Evil was omnipresent, and they were wary that it might lie within themselves if they were not disciplined and vigilant enough. The struggle was fought constantly both externally and internally. While they may have had faith that they were in the Promised Land, they were pessimistic that they could ever see for themselves the fulfilled promise of that Eden. As Jewett and Lawrence suggest, this is the basis of Old West and frontier narratives. The only way to regenerate the community, as referenced in the work of Richard Slotkin (1973), is through violence (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 111-112).

As the American Monomyth evolved, the Enlightenment in the U.S. brought a different vision to the post-Puritan climate. Now, there was optimism for reaching the utopia they were looking for. Their country was undoubtedly Eden; they just had to acknowledge it and preserve it through education and hard work. In this new vision of the United States, the hero of the wilderness evolved into the saint superhero, who through superior virtue and superhuman power can not only eradicate the intruding evil Other, but also do it while

maintaining purity and a moral high ground: "All one needs to escape the ambiguity of violent power is more power" (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 40). This is the quintessential comic book superhero, whose tradition evolved from the first appearance of Superman in 1938's *Action Comics* #1 (Gavaler 2017, 2). The Punisher, on the other hand, is a character that harkens back to the Puritan mentality, which is why he is always at odds with post-Puritan superheroes like Spider-Man and Daredevil. In this regard, the Punisher has the potential to work as a satire and critique of the comic book superhero genre, as he brings its underlying and uncomfortable authoritarian characteristics to the surface, crossing the line (the frontier, as it may) and killing, something most superheroes are averse to doing. Richard Slotkin has linked his concept of "regeneration through violence" to Trump rallies and the MAGA movement (2024, 290-307). When viewed within this framework, it is clear why the Punisher skull logo has been appropriated by U.S. military personnel (since at least the Iraq War), police officers, and MAGA supporters.

Table 1 summarises the core differences between the Puritan and post-Puritan worldviews from which each particular kind of hero emerges:

PURITAN	POST-PURITAN
• Dangerous wilderness • Omnipresent evil • Pessimism • Regeneration through violence • The vigilante (anti)hero, less virtuous and non-powered	• Enlightenment and Utopianism • The U.S. as mythic Eden • Optimism through education • Heroic defence of civilisation • The saint superhero, with superior virtue and superhuman powers

Table 1: Key aspects of the Puritan and post-Puritan American societies.

Lastly, Lawrence and Jewett detect three processes in this mythic paradigm "that allow the audience's encounter with urban hell to be mythically productive, offering appealing patterns for thought and action" (2002, 113). These components provide a productive lens through which the narratives of the Punisher can be analysed.

The first process they mention is *mythic selectivity*, whereby the story "defines the factual realities in a given situation" (2002, 113). The supposed "realism" of the storyworld selectively presents so-called facts that are, in reality, distorted. In *Death Wish* (1974), New York is nothing more than an urban hell full of thugs who "fit their evil mold in a way that makes it easy to cheer when they lose their lives" (2002, 114), whereas Hawaii and Tucson are presented as Edenic and completely safe. Likewise, law enforcement officials, as well as politicians, are often either incompetent or corrupt. In this scenario, Charles Bronson's hero is larger than life, a once-pacifist who, destined by fate, becomes an "unwilling vigilante, stoically accepting his duty" (2002, 115).

Secondly, in the process of *mythic massage*, the audience is assured that the differences between myth and reality can be overcome. In *Death Wish* (1974), we are told that within a month of Kersey's vigilante career, mugging cases have dropped by half. Justice can really be attained by vigilante violence; the community (and the world) can be morally redeemed if only everyone followed the hero's (and the United States') example (2002, 116-117).

Finally, with the process of *invitation to emulate,* a text seems to invite its audience to internalise and follow the behaviour patterns of the story's hero in what Lawrence and Jewett refer to as a "call to discipleship". This component can also be part of the plot, as seen in *Death Wish* (1974), where Paul Kersey solidifies his decision to embark on his vigilante pursuits after witnessing a classic Old West showdown between good and bad cowboys at a tourist-filled attraction in Tucson, Arizona. Just as Kersey is impelled to emulate the justice dealt by Old West heroes in his modern urban setting, so can viewers follow Kersey's example and apply it in their own lives (2002, 117-118).

THE PUNISHER 101

Created by writer Gerry Conway and artists John Romita and Ross Andru, the Punisher, a.k.a. Frank Castle, debuted in issue #129 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1973). In his first appearance, the character's basic ethos is presented: criminals must be punished by death. As Dolph Lundgren succinctly puts it when incarnating the first live-action iteration of the character in the film *The Punisher*, directed by Mark Goldblatt: "You're guilty, you're dead"

(1989). In the story of his debut, the Punisher's objective is to kill Spider-Man as he believes the "wall-crawler" to be guilty of murder. Here, we already see the groundwork of the Puritan vs. post-Puritan tension that Frank Castle will have with most of Marvel's superheroes.

Conway has stated that he was inspired by *The Executioner* series of novels by Don Pendleton, where a Vietnam War veteran becomes a serial killer of criminals after his family is murdered (Mougin 1985, 8). This basic premise would also be part of Frank Castle's backstory and the Punisher mythos as he evolved in subsequent appearances, becoming a one man's never-ending war on criminals.

The peak of the Punisher's first production cycle, as Kent Worcester points out in *A Cultural History of The Punisher* (2023), was between 1985 and the early to mid-1990s, when the character was immensely popular. While during most of the first decade of his existence the character was portrayed mainly as a trigger-happy, dangerous man, the 1980s saw the character's stories and world evolve into the grim and gritty template (Worcester 2023, 64). This period is also one of brand and transmedia expansion. The year 1985 saw the character getting his first solo comic book title in the form of a five-issue miniseries, which, due to its success, led to a long-running ongoing comic series starting in 1987. At some point in the early 1990s, five different Punisher comic book series were being published simultaneously, including one called *The Punisher Armory* (Brown *et al.* 1990-1994), which would only consist of images of his arsenal accompanied by caption boxes with the Punisher's narrations giving details and anecdotes of each weapon. The first live-action version was the already mentioned *The Punisher* (1989), a direct-to-video release (in the U.S.) famous for eschewing the iconic skull logo from the Punisher's costume for being too cartoony, a decision the director Mark Goldblatt regretted many years later, as he expressed in the audio commentary of the 2013 Blu-ray and DVD release. The transmedia expansion continued with the release of five different video games between 1990 and 1993, in which players could now play as the titular anti-hero and deliver his particular brand of murderous justice. Of interest for this article is a note from writer and editor Carl Potts within the user manual for *The Punisher* (Paragon Software, 1990), an action-adventure video game. Potts worked on the character both in the comics and on one of his guest appearances on *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* (Richardson 1995). In his note, he writes:

> The urge to see harsh, swift justice brought to those who flaunt the law is a strong one in most of us. On moral and practical grounds, we obviously can't really go out and do the things a character like the Punisher does – but, for a while at least, we can have a great time immersed in a cathartic fantasy where we can see to it that bad guys don't get away. (Potts 1990, 4-5)

This disclaimer warns against the dangers of accepting the invitation to emulate, a thorny issue embedded in urban vigilante stories, which at the same time is an important aspect of its appeal as a cathartic fantasy. There might have been an inclination to stress this point as, after all, one could now not only read Frank Castle's adventures but also *become* him in a video game setting. The invitation to emulate and the "Werther effect"[2] with regard to video games became an important issue within the medium's history (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 203-204), and a warning of this sort within a Punisher game as early as 1990 is noteworthy.

Another notable video game from this period is the arcade beat 'em up *The Punisher* (Capcom 1993). The beat 'em up genre had been strongly influenced by American films of the 1970s and 1980s that depicted street violence and urban vigilantism, including *Death Wish* (1974), *The Warriors* (Walter Hill 1979), and *Streets of Fire* (Walter Hill 1984) (Zanotti 2018), so it was perfectly suited for a character like the Punisher.

The peak of the Punisher's popularity coincided with a period of high crime and social unrest in New York (Allen 2014, 40-45). His popularity declined in the mid-1990s, which coincided with New York's crime rates beginning to decrease and with the crisis the U.S. comics industry was facing at the time, leading to what has been termed the Great Comics Crash of 1996 (TV Tropes 2024).

THE PUNISHER'S SECOND PRODUCTION CYCLE

Worcester marks the year 2000 as the beginning of the Punisher's second production cycle, when changing paradigms of the tone and type of stories of the character led to a newfound success and transmedia presence. Between 2000 and 2005, a transmedia interplay emerged between Punisher products in comics, film, and video games. To analyse the American

Monomyth in the video game *The Punisher* (Volition 2005), we need to take a closer look at other media incarnations of the character during this brief period. In a history-repeating-itself twist of fate, this second transmedia expansion echoed the first in its order of media release: 1) limited comic series and ongoing comic series; 2) film; and, finally, 3) video game.

1) Limited comic series and ongoing comic series

This was kickstarted by a 12-issue limited series by Northern Irish writer Garth Ennis and English artist Steve Dillon (and other collaborators). Their Punisher was a fusion of the trigger-happy and grim-and-gritty versions of the character, with an emphasis on "cheeky jokes, glossy visuals, and postmodern bombast" (Worcester 2023, 207). Ennis himself stated that what he was going for was "[e]ntertainment. Plain and simple. No complex analysis of the causes of crime, not a portrait of one man's tragic descent into murderous psychosis, not an in-depth examination of the vigilante down the ages" (Ennis *et al.* 2001a, 6). With regards to his relationship to the U.S., Ennis said that he "grew up with American films in general, and Westerns in particular", and, having moved to the U.S. "fairly early on" in his career, his "love for the place, the people, its culture and its history is deep and abiding" (Grady 2012). A previous Ennis-Dillon collaboration, the long-running creator-owned comic book series *Preacher* (1995-2000), published by DC Comics under its Vertigo imprint, had already explored tropes from Western films and other typically American fictions. Similarly to what they had done in that series, by employing elements of satire and meta-commentary in *The Punisher* vol. 5 (2000) and its subsequent ongoing series, vol. 6 (2001-2004), Ennis and his collaborators explored the American mythic paradigm and the urban vigilante tropes. Worcester suggests that "[t]he first production cycle has an earnest quality; the second exhibits a cynical undertow" (Worcester 2023, 211).

Ennis and Dillon's very first issue undermines the Puritan Christian aspects of the American Monomyth. In an internal monologue at the end of the issue, while a member of the Italian mob is falling to his death from the Empire State building, Frank Castle references a previous story where he died, and the angels made him an offer: "The idea was I'd kill for them. Clean up their mistakes on Earth. Eventually redeem myself. Tried it. Didn't like it. Told them where to stick it". The angels then showed him that his family was finally at peace in

Heaven and "cast him down. Back to a world of killers, rapists, psychos, perverts. (...) The angels thought it would be hell for me. **But they were wrong**" (Ennis *et al.* 2001a, 26-27; emphasis in the original). This embodiment of the American Monomyth turns his back on Heaven, does not see himself as a deliverer of God's Vengeance, and feels at peace when killing criminals. The city might be an urban hell for others, but, in a twisted reversal of the mythic paradigm, it is Eden for him. This disdain for his role as any kind of redeemer is further stressed in a conversation he has with his neighbour, Joan, while he is lying in bed and recovering from serious wounds. After she asks him why he kills bad people, his short answer is "I hate them", to which she responds: "Oh. I thought it might be because you wanted to make the world safe for good people" (2001a, 159).

The tension between the Puritan hero and the post-Puritan hero, or the antihero and the superhero, is explored in one of the first issues of the series. On a rooftop, the Punisher is preparing to snipe a mobster when he is confronted by Daredevil, who tells him that the mobster must be apprehended and brought to justice. After a struggle between the two, the Punisher chains Daredevil up, leaving only a revolver in his hand, and gives him a choice: either kill the Punisher before he shoots the mobster, or the mobster dies: "If you don't shoot, you've got a death on your conscience. A death you could have prevented. If you shoot, you're a killer" (2001a, 68). This is, he tells Daredevil, the kind of choice he makes every time he pulls the trigger. After trying in vain to convince Frank that no one needs to die, Daredevil decides to shoot him, but the shot does not go off because there is no firing pin. "You can leave the killing to me" (2001a, 71), the Punisher says to Daredevil before knocking him out with a punch. The objective of this scene is to show two variants of the mythic paradigm criticising each other for failing to address the moral dilemmas of crimefighting.

In addition, an ironic reversal of the process of the invitation to emulate is present in the twelve issues of the limited series. An important subplot involves three other vigilantes who are inspired by the Punisher to go about their own murdering sprees: the Holy, a Latino Catholic father who kills people with an axe whenever they confess to him their sins, and who, while ridden with guilt at the beginning, feels validated when he discovers the existence of the Punisher, taking it as a sign from God that he is on the right path; Elite, a blonde upper-class man who murders anyone who dares to disturb his "nice neighborhood"; and Payback,

an Afro-American man who executes complete big corporation boardrooms who he believes are responsible for many ills. Eventually, they get together and form the self-labelled "Vigilante Squad", "[b]ut they squabble over the root cause of crime. Is it the lazy poor, the greedy rich, or our fallen nature?" (Worcester 2023, 209). They see the Punisher as their role model and want to find him so he can be their leader. Instead, the Punisher tracks and confronts them: "Lead **you.** You're a lunatic. You're a nazi. And you—does the name Maria Lopez mean anything to you?" (Ennis *et al.* 2001a, 264; emphasis in the original). This last question to Payback, Frank continues, is in reference to a woman who worked as a cleaner in one of the corporate buildings attacked by Payback: "She's one of four innocent people who've been cut down in the crossfire of your little crusade, just because you couldn't be bothered to plan properly" (2001a, 264). In these words, we also see mythic selectivity at play: the Punisher never kills innocent people, either by mistake or as collateral damage, because he "plans properly". The three men are surprised; they thought this was what he wanted, and the Holy pleads: "Together we can **punish the guilty!** We can clean up this city once and for all! In Heaven's name, man! **Isn't this exactly what you want?!**" (2001a, 265; emphasis in the original). To this, the Punisher just answers "No." (2001a, 266) and kills them. This is the complete opposite reaction to Paul Kersey's pleasure at seeing on TV that his vigilante actions are inspiring people to do the same in *Death Wish* (1974).

A last point regards the process of mythic massage. The never-ending seriality nature of the Punisher's comics means there can never really be any resolution to the overarching conflict. In this way, the comforting idea that vigilantism can bring justice and peace is instantly undermined, at least at the social macro-level. While the Punisher can help innocent individuals, his war on criminals is eternal. This infinite loop of violence that never reaches any meaningful solutions and the fact that maybe Frank Castle is not helping but worsening the situation have always been part of Punisher comics, to a lesser or greater extent, depending on the writer exploring those themes. His first solo series, written by Steven Grant, was titled *The Punisher: Circle of Blood* (1985), a reference to this concept, for example. Garth Ennis' twist on this theme is that Frank Castle not only knows that he is part of a never-ending cycle of violence, but he actually craves it.

2) The 2004 Film

This renewed interest in the franchise led to the production of a film. *The Punisher* (2004), directed by Jonathan Heinsleigh and starring Thomas Jane in the titular role and John Travolta as the main villain, was the first theatrical release in the U.S. for the character. This time, the iconic skull logo is part of the Punisher's costume. The film adapts some of the setting and characters of Ennis and Dillon's first comic run, like Frank's neighbours, Joan, Spacker Dave and Mr. Bumpo, his relationship with them, and the goofy villain simply known as the Russian.

Scholar Lorrie Palmer has characterised the film as "revisionist superhero Western", one of the reasons being that Jane's Frank Castle "experiences both the intimacy of family and the violence of solitary vigilantism", in contrast with "the Western archetype who can only observe hearth and home from the outside" (2013, 293). Ennis and Dillon's Castle has a cold and emotionless relationship with his neighbours, with the subtext that he may care about them, as evidenced by the (economic) rewards he offers them for their assistance, for example. In the 2004 film, Frank Castle is portrayed as a more sympathetic character. We see him grieving, emotionally suffering, and open somewhat to the warm treatment of his neighbours. There is even sexual tension with Joan, played by Rebbeca Romijn, but he refuses her advances. In this regard, we can see the trope of the American Monomythic hero as sexually pure at play. Furthermore, while this Punisher kills evildoers, the film never shows him doing anything extremely questionable that could be anything but righteous vengeance. The film's rendition of the American Monomyth makes it so that the audience wants these criminals punished. In this version of the Punisher's origin story, Eden is represented as a family reunion one fine summer day on a beach. This time, it is not just him, his wife and children on a picnic, but the whole extended family, including other children and elders. More than twenty people, except for Frank, are massacred. The final scene features a voiceover by Thomas Jane, stating that Frank Castle is dead, referring to him, warning "those who do evil to others" that he will come for them. Worcester suggests that while the revenge plot seems plausible for Jane's Punisher, "[t]he suggestion that the Three-quarter-inch hcharacter would then wage war against criminals everywhere does not" (Worcester 2023, 227). While there may be revisionism of Western tropes, especially with regard to themes of family, and some of the absurd elements from Ennis and Dillon's comics get their due on screen (e.g., the

Russian), the 2004 film reinforces the American Monomyth by playing it straight and harkening back to the Western and urban vigilante films of the 1970s and before.

3) "The Best Punisher Video Game"

In 2005, the video game *The Punisher* was released, developed and published by Volition for Xbox, PlayStation 2 and Windows. From all the video games featuring the character, the 2005 title is, as Blair Farrell from the long-running blog *Comic Book Video Games* suggests, "above all else The Punisher game to end all Punisher games and has sadly yet to be followed-up or topped" (2016).[3] The game follows the transmedia path of the character's second production cycle, where the 2004 film left off. It credits Garth Ennis among the game's writers, as well as Jimmy Palmiotti (who worked as inker during Ennis and Dillon's run) and MIchael Breault (a game designer with a long career in the fields of board and video games), and Thomas Jane lends his voice to reprise the titular character. The game begins with Frank Castle narrating that after killing Howard Saint, he is now going against other criminals. However, the storyworld presented and the character designs could not be further removed from the film's, opting instead to base them on Garth Ennis' Punisher run from 2000 to 2004. In his commentaries on the game, Farrell points out that "[w]hen telling a Punisher story, it seems the best way you can go is one of two ways: you take things seriously and play the angle of Frank as a broken man, or you embrace the carnage of a character who straps a skull on his chest who carries around large-caliber weapons and takes no prisoners" (2016). While the 2004 film strives for the former, the video game goes for the latter. One would think that, by going the Ennis route and having him on the writing credits, the game would also comment on the mythic paradigm. Instead, the game prioritises extreme violence that disregards the subtleties found in the comics, even when it incorporates humorous and absurd elements.

The video game is of the shooter genre, in this case, 3D and third-person. Lawrence and Jewett devote a chapter to video games in *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), and focus on this genre in particular:

> The firmly established traditions of [the shooter games] genre presume that your finger must always be on the trigger, that you must be ready to kill easily defined enemies, and that you will hesitate only for tactical reasons. It is a world that is completely militarized, but without command structure or any accountability to political authority. It is a true aristocracy of violence that even the Virginian would find repellent. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 217)

The game's intro cutscenes set the tone for the Punisher's storyworld by incurring in a process of mythic selectivity taken from the character's post-2000 comics. As the crime rates in New York were significantly lower than in the previous three decades, for the Punisher's stories to continue working, authors needed to address this. Walking through the night streets of the city, Castle urges us in a voiceover narration to "[f]orget the things you've heard about (...) the new New York", assuring us that "it's not real" and that "the old New York is waiting, just below the surface". Then he refers to the policies of the city governments of previous years: "Just because the mayor chased away the monsters (...) to Brooklyn and the Bronx. Don't think this place has changed" (Volition 2005). This monologue is adapted from the first pages of *The Punisher* vol. 6 #6 (Ennis *et al.* 2001b). Beyond the political commentary, whether there is any truth to it or not, with this monologue, the game conveys to the player, through mythic selectivity, that there is a "true" New York, thereby eliminating any doubt that the Punisher's crusade is righteous.

As soon as that cutscene ends, the game gives the player control of the Punisher avatar. In a dark alley, a young African-American man wearing a hoodie attempts to steal a woman's purse. As part of the game's tutorial, the player is told to grab the thug from behind and use a specific key for a "quick kill". While it is possible to simply knock him out, the tutorial omits this information and instead urges the player to perform an execution. The message here is not to have moral doubts about the actions taken in the game, as the gameplay mechanics not only encourage the player to do this but also reward them. Here, any criminal can be brutally murdered, regardless of the severity of the crime. After taking down the thug, the woman calmly thanks the player. Throughout this scene, we can see the process of mythic massage at work. The negative consequences of a man brutally killing another man in front of a defenceless woman in a dark alley are nil.

Mythic selectivity is also present in the game mechanics, in that the player cannot shoot or attack innocent people. When aiming at an innocent person, usually a hostage, the game changes the graphic of the targeting point and blocks the player from shooting. Thus, the avatarisation (Navarro-Remesal 2015) of the Punisher character in this game incorporates one of his quintessential mythical aspects into its gameplay: Frank Castle never kills innocent people, whether intentionally, accidentally, or through collateral damage.

Between missions, the player can view their progress, select their weapons, and choose the missions to play in the "Apartment" area of the menus and settings. This area also includes two boards: a criminal chart and a news clippings board. The criminal chart features photos of the various game bosses to be eliminated, and the news clippings board displays newspaper excerpts of the Punisher's achievements in eliminating crime in the city, using images from the Ennis and Dillon comics and other sources. These two features allude to mythic selectivity: official law enforcement authorities are failing in their fight against crime, with only the Punisher achieving newsworthy results (the game's framing story involving detectives Molly Von Richthofen and Martin Soap interrogating Frank Castle also emphasises this point). Additionally, there is a hint of mythic massage: simply completing the killings on the criminal chart in a succession of game objectives will save the city from crime. However, it is also true that the game ends with a setup for a sequel that was never developed, implying that the cycle of crime and violence always continues, a recurrent theme in Punisher stories.

As mentioned previously, the invitation to emulate and the "Werther effect" were important issues regarding the influence of violent video games on young people, especially after the Columbine High School massacre, in which two teenage boys, fans of first-person shooter games, "slaughtered twelve classmates and a teacher before killing themselves" (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 202). However, Lawrence and Jewett point out that trying to find the cause-and-effect correlation of media and real-world occurrences "burdens every effort to assess the influence of a culture's icons and symbolic stories" (2002, 204). Instead, they suggest viewing video games as another form of mythic socialisation that "now allows the participant to be a saviour and to viscerally feel the pleasures of redeeming a situation from threat" (2002, 200). Whether or not the invitation to emulate is implicit in the player's experience of being the Punisher, the 2005 video game does not incorporate this theme into

its story explicitly, as *Death Wish* (1974) does by constructing and reinforcing the mythic process, and the Ennis and Dillon comics do by deconstructing it. Thus, the game's avoidance of the issue is a lost opportunity to comment on it, given how heated the debate over violence in video games was at the time and the character and genre's tradition of dealing with the trope.

The tension between the Puritan and post-Puritan hero paradigms is similarly not explored. Unlike the 2004 film, this game puts the Punisher within the wider Marvel universe. In this context, there are guest appearances by other four heroes: Black Widow, Nick Fury, Iron Man, and Daredevil. Black Widow and Nick Fury appear in a "team-up" capacity, showing up each in a different mission and fighting alongside the player. These two characters are particularly suited to this role because they, too, engage with the Puritan model of the antihero and have historically been in tension with traditional modes of superheroism. It is not difficult to imagine either of them embodying the concept of "regeneration through violence" in some capacity. Still, the suspension of disbelief is stretched when we see both characters say or do nothing while the Punisher constantly tortures and executes men in front of them. In the case of Iron Man and Daredevil, being characters who fit the post-Puritan model, they only appear as cameos in cutscenes. Iron Man appears at the end of a mission that takes place in the Stark Industries building, after the Punisher has already left and the place has been destroyed, leaving it filled with casualties. The scene conveys some information that advances the narrative and concludes with a tongue-in-cheek line from Iron Man, referencing his struggle with alcoholism in the comics: "I need a drink" (Volition, 2005). Daredevil appears as his civilian persona, the blind lawyer Matt Murdock. He enters the room where detectives Soap and Von Richthofen are interrogating Frank Castle, and states that Castle is his client and that no more questions will be answered. Punisher says he does not need his help and fires him. This is the closest the game goes to illustrating the antihero and superhero tension, as Castle rejects Murdock's help and, by extension, his methods and what he represents. While an interesting reference to the history of both characters, the game does not delve further into its exploration of the theme.

Finally, the game was famous for its unique gameplay elements involving torture and its detailed graphic depiction of violence, having been slightly censored to have the execution

scenes be black and white and blurred, thus avoiding the "Adults Only" rating to meet the "Mature" rating. The game was marketed to highlight this feature, as one promotional poster reads, "Guns don't kill people. Three-quarter-inch holes in the head kill people", while showing the Punisher about to kill a man with a big industrial drill. The slogan is misleading, though, because, while it is true that the player can kill people in creative and absurd ways in the game, lots of guns are also involved in the killing. It would not be a Punisher fiction if it did not involve his armoury.

The torture elements are part of the interrogation mechanics. The Punisher can catch almost any criminal and subject them to an interrogation, where he puts the enemy in a torture situation that can range from beatings and chokings in their simpler forms to a wood chipper and piranhas in the "special interrogations". The objective is to "break" the enemy without killing them in order to extract information; however, they can also be killed, regardless of whether the information has been obtained or not. Sometimes, the execution moments trigger flashbacks to traumatic moments in Frank's life, depicted with brief images from the comics and a few lines of dialogue. In one of them, a man being tortured yells: "Have mercy!", to which the Punisher responds, "Death is a mercy" (Volition 2005), before executing him. In this brief moment, we see the reinforcement of the Puritan era's moral values. If faith is regenerated through violence, mercy, both a consequence and a vehicle of faith, must do so as well.

As Peter E. Rauch indicates, the points system and rules of the game make it so that "killing is rewarded, torture is rewarded, but accidental killing *during* torture is punished". The information obtained from the interrogations is not indispensable to advancing the game. He concludes that the "ethics of torture" work at a mechanical level but not at the narrative one, "and thus the narrative and ethics cannot be integrated into a moral argument" (2007, 75). Some of the special interrogation death scenes are adapted straight from the Ennis and Dillon comics. Their comedic effect worked in the context of the postmodern and cynical deconstruction of the urban vigilante tropes, but the video game, by eschewing those explorations, reduces their narrative impact. Rauch sums it up with a reference to George Orwell's *1984*: "The purpose of torture is torture" (2007, 74).

This "torture engine" is one of the game's defining features, setting it apart from other shooters of the era. The cult status of the game is evident in the fact that the fan community developed a software patch for the Windows version, which removes the censoring filter and displays these scenes in all their vivid, detailed gore (PCGamingWiki 2021).

CONCLUSION

Lawrence and Jewett's theories of the American Monomyth and their application to urban vigilante fictions provide a fertile framework for analysing the Punisher's stories and media depictions. The acknowledgement of the problematic moral characteristics of the character has had its place since his first appearance in 1973, but the ways in which the American Monomyth has been represented in the Punisher's texts have been different depending on the context and the authors working on them. Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's comic book run of the early 2000s engages with the processes on which the myth operates (mythic selectivity, mythic massage, and the invitation to emulate) and comments on them in a postmodern, playful, and cynical way. By doing so, certain aspects of the American Monomyth are thus critiqued and subverted.

The popularity of the Ennis-Dillon comics led to a larger transmedia presence for the Punisher, with the release of a film directed by Jonathan Hensleigh in 2004 and a video game developed by the studio Volition in 2005, both of which drew inspiration from and had an intertextual connection to the Ennis-Dillon run. The 2004 film reinforces the American mythic paradigm, rather than subverting it, by making the character of Frank Castle a more sympathetic figure and by harkening back to the tropes of Western and urban vigilante films of the 1960s and 1970s. The 2005 video game by Volition, although it features Garth Ennis as a co-writer, also misses several opportunities to engage critically with the American Monomyth, focusing instead on the violent, cathartic fantasy of vigilantism. Through its gameplay mechanics, Volition's *The Punisher* reinforces the processes on which the myth operates.

END NOTES

[1] A simple browse through the r/thepunisher community on Reddit, which has 41,000 members as of November 2025, shows the preference for this game. It is consistently recommended as the best Punisher video game, and posts suggesting a remaster of it should be developed are popular.

[2] Lawrence and Jewett define the Werther effect as the process where "an audience member (a) experiences a work of fantasy within a secular context that (b) helps to shape the reader/viewer's sense of what is real and desirable, in such a way that, (c) the reader/viewer takes actions consistent with the vision inspired by the interaction between his own fantasy and that popular entertainment" (2002, 10).

[3] The game received mixed reviews among general video game critics, though. On the review aggregator site Metacritic, it has a score of 69/100 based on 47 critic reviews, while video game database Mobygames shows an average score of 70% with 39 critic reviews.

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