

## Chapter 4

### *Freeman's Mind* and Transnational Fan Media

One of the most significant but least understood cultural developments of the early 21st century has been the increasing capacity of transnational audiences to produce and distribute digital media outside of the direct control of media corporations. This dynamic is especially prominent in videogame fan communities, everywhere from the extraordinary productivity of the mod community (fan-created interactive content for videogames) to the rise of new digital media forms such as machinima (fan-created videos created with videogame rendering software).<sup>1</sup>

These fan communities played a key role in Ross Scott's *Freeman's Mind* (2007-2014), a heavily modified walk-through of Valve Software's science-fiction videogame *Half Life* (1998), published on Youtube and other free-to-view video sharing networks.<sup>2</sup> The series derives its name from the playable protagonist of *Half Life*, a theoretical physicist named Gordon Freeman, who works at a secret government laboratory. While all of the non-player characters in the various *Half Life* games (*Half Life*, *Half Life 2*, and *Half Life 2: Episode One* and *Half Life 2: Episode Two*) have voice acting, Freeman has always been a silent protagonist with no voice dialogue.

Scott broke with this tradition by writing and performing a voice track for Gordon Freeman's internal monologue. Thanks to a combination of superlative scriptwriting, voice-acting, and editing, *Freeman's Mind* transformed the video remix, the videogame modification or mod, and the videogame walk-through into a series which is one of the touchstone media works of the early 21st century.<sup>3</sup>

To appreciate the magnitude of Scott's achievement, it is worth recalling that the series is comprised of sixty-nine official episodes, amounting to nine and half hours of footage, produced over the course of seven years with minimal financial support from the commercial mass media. While Scott did earn small amounts of ad revenue from his Youtube channel and other forms of media employment, the bulk of his support came from the *Freeman's Mind* fan community.

This community enabled Scott to overcome the constraints on previous generations of independent media producers, ranging from the high cost of proprietary production tools to the scheduling requirements of commercial broadcasting channels. Scott relied on Valve's open source tools for *Half Life* modders, which Valve released to transnational audiences for free, as well as the media production tools of the post-2008 digital commons. Fans publicized the series on social media platforms, provided Scott with monetary donations and computer equipment, and assisted with sound editing, website maintenance and subtitling.

Most important of all, fans provided constant encouragement and critical feedback while waiting patiently for each episode (the interval between each episode averaged about five weeks). The first episode of *Freeman's Mind* was created in 2007 as a light-hearted diversion from some of Scott's other machinima projects. It was the enthusiastic fan reaction to the initial episode which convinced Scott to produce additional episodes, and eventually to play through the entirety of the first *Half Life*.<sup>4</sup>

The length of these episodes was not primarily due to Youtube's restriction on the length of most user uploads to a maximum of 10 minutes between 2006 and 2010.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it reflected

the narrative density and complexity of each episode. Scott integrated Freeman's running internal monologue with in-game scripted events and non-scripted animated sequences, many of which satirized some of the more dated design features of the original *Half Life* as well as the genre conventions of the alien invasion thriller, the science fiction monster spectacular, and the platformer videogame.

In retrospect, the fan community made one other indispensable contribution to the series. It enabled *Freeman's Mind* to openly critique the transnational plutocracy in a videogame genre previously dominated by narratives of US imperial revanchism, a.k.a. the first-person shooters which glorified the US War on Terror conducted between 2001 and 2008.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the original *Half Life* was always one of the few commercially successful shooters which was critical of US neoimperial interventions, in large part thanks to Marc Laidlaw's ingenious script.<sup>7</sup>

Yet it was geopolitical timing which made *Freeman's Mind* just the right machinima series in just the wrong place, to paraphrase a famous line from *Half Life 2*, to make all the difference in the world.<sup>8</sup> The first episode of the series premiered in December 2007, the moment when the 1995-2006 US housing boom and the 2002-2006 Wall Street securitization bubbles began to implode. Whereas the arrival of the original *Half Life* in 1998 was perfectly timed to satirize the dotcom bubble of 1997-2001, *Freeman's Mind* was perfectly positioned to narrate the global economic crisis of 2007-2009 and its geopolitical consequences.

This crisis had two significant consequences for transnational audiences. First, the core ideological claim of the Wall Street plutocrats, namely that market deregulation generates the most efficient economic outcomes, lost credibility amidst the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. In the fields of journalism and politics, this legitimization crisis opened the door to the citizen journalism of Bill Moyers and Nomi Prins, sites such as New Economic Perspectives and Paul Jay's Real News Network, and the work of heterodox economists ranging from Joseph Stiglitz to Yanis Varoufakis.<sup>9</sup>

The second consequence was the crushing experience of immiseration for hundreds of millions of young people just entering the workforce. This experience included the explosion in student loan debt in the US (almost nonexistent in 1980, but \$1 trillion by 2012), state-administered austerity in the eurozone, and the structural unemployment afflicting the youth of the industrializing nations.<sup>10</sup>

What was different about this economic crisis compared to previous ones was that these young people had significant amounts of secondary and tertiary education, and could access planetary digital communication networks. In fact, these young people were a key driver of the dramatic expansion of the world internet audience from 1.4 billion in 2007 to approximately 3.0 billion at the end of 2014.<sup>11</sup> They were also a key constituency of the mass protest movements which swept across the world-system between 2011 and 2014.<sup>12</sup> These young people had a cultural need for forms of digital media which spoke to their personal experience of marginalization or immiseration, which were free to access on low-cost smartphones and mobile platforms, and which were conversant with post-2008 forms of collective political protest and digital cultural participation.

*Freeman's Mind* did not just meet this need, it gave its audience unprecedented insight into the transnational class struggles of the early 21st century. It is no accident that every single episode of *Freeman's Mind* critiques some aspect of plutocracy, by contrasting the promise of high-technology consumerism with the reality of economic catastrophe. Scott's version of

Freeman constantly bemoans the fact that the Black Mesa Research Facility is run like a profit-maximizing corporation, and harps on the theme of hunting for a new job while escaping from the wreckage of his current workplace. Freeman also dwells at length on the venality of the officials and state agencies who are supposed to protect Black Mesa's personnel, but instead sacrifice the latter out of narrow self-interest – a transparent allegory of how the plutocracy monopolized the power of the state to redeem its own bad bets, while bringing disaster down on everyone else.<sup>13</sup>

In short, Scott links Freeman's personal struggle of survival to the collective experience of the educated youth experiencing transnational immiseration. One of the most obvious forms of this narrative strategy is the extraordinary number of service-sector jobs named or referred to in the series. In the very first episode of *Freeman's Mind*, Freeman mentions the occupations of pilot, human resources personnel, robot designer, safety expert, environmental protection staffer, and courtroom official. Over the course of the sixty-nine official episodes of the series, Scott cites literally hundreds of service-sector professions and occupational specializations.

What makes Freeman's running commentary on the job market compelling is Scott's characterization of Freeman as a brilliant but exceedingly eccentric particle physicist. Consider this scene in episode 2, just prior to the alien invasion:

*While walking down corridor, Freeman glances through window and notices a scientist writing something on a whiteboard inside a room.*

Freeman: "Wait a second, did I see what I think I did?" *Freeman enters room and approaches the whiteboard.*

Freeman: "Yep, I sure did – Newton's formula for gravitational force. Having trouble remembering that one, guys? What is this? Are we back in high school now? My department is working on quantum displacement. Just what the hell are you guys doing? Jerking around in lab coats, from the looks of things." *Freeman exits room in disgust.*

Freeman: "I just can't believe it. Those monkeys in there are having trouble learning about gravity, whereas I can recite the quantum chromodynamic gauge invariant Lagrangian in my sleep. There is no justice."<sup>14</sup>

The formula on the whiteboard is indeed Newton's formula, while the reference to the Lagrangian invariant is reasonably accurate.<sup>15</sup> This is not just top-notch scriptwriting, it is also a clever homage to Marc Laidlaw's storyline, which always maintained the highest degree of scientific fidelity to the current state of astrophysics.

This sequence is a prime example of the "network effect" of transnational audiences. Scott had no formal training in the field of particle physics, but simply searched online for scientific terminology appropriate to the situation. He assumed that his audience would have the same power to conduct impromptu online searches of their own, and constructed dialogue which would appeal to transnational audiences with access to digital search tools.

Scott initially deployed this network effect for the purpose of character development. Various sequences depict Freeman as jumpy, quarrelsome, more than slightly paranoid, and quick to critique others. On the other hand, they also exhibit his brilliant problem-solving skills. While these attributes make Freeman a less than ideal co-worker, they are also the qualities most

useful in an actual state of emergency, and lend credibility to Freeman's later ability to survive the alien invasion.

Later episodes significantly expand the scale and scope of this network effect, transforming Marc Laidlaw's satirical fable of a neoliberal speculation gone disastrously wrong into something else. Our first glimpse of this transformation occurs in episode 5. After Freeman just barely survives the accident which triggers the alien invasion, a stuck metal door blocks his exit from the facility. Freeman's response is to cite one of the most infamous scandals of US industrial history:

Freeman: *outraged*: "I'm going to sue the hell out of Black Mesa when I get out of here. Locking your workers in? That's what the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory did. Locked its workers in, then there was a fire, and everybody died! That's a formula for success." *Freeman hits the metal door with his crowbar in frustration*. "Dammit. We're making history right now -- crap history." *Freeman accidentally hits the keypad with the crowbar. The keypad short-circuits, causing the door to open*.

Freeman: *with a cry of triumph*: "I am incredible. Is there any end to the number of problems I can solve just by beating the hell out something? I'm not sure there is! Yep, that's how I say open sesame -- with a crowbar to the face."<sup>16</sup>

This is much more than a passing allusion to the 1911 fire which killed 145 textile workers in New York City and sparked nationwide outrage. What is crucial here is the mention of the crowbar, *Half Life's* iconic tool and weapon. Scott thereby transforms Freeman's class position from the elite theoretical physicist to the plebian construction worker. This allows viewers to step, for the briefest of moments, into the shoes of the Indonesian, Bangladeshi and other transnational workers around the world who have suffered from some of the worst transnational workplace accidents in history.<sup>17</sup>

This raises the question, to be sure, as to how Gordon Freeman could possibly symbolize the class struggles of a planetary proletariat, given the structural privileges of his white, male, highly educated and heteronormative identity. The short answer is that he does not -- or at least, not at first. One of the most praiseworthy achievements of *Freeman's Mind* is that it does not shy away from the cultural, political and economic divide between the workers of the industrialized nations and those of the industrializing nations. Freeman's monologues between episode 1 and 34 showcase the political responses -- some progressive, some revanchist -- triggered by the 2007-2009 economic crisis among the workers of the industrialized nations.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, episodes 35 through 68 of *Freeman's Mind* integrate the most progressive of these political responses with the most progressive political initiatives of the workers of the industrializing nations.

One of the first examples of this admixture of progressive and revanchist responses occurs at the end of episode 6, when Freeman is attacked by aliens while descending on a slow-moving elevator into the lower depths of Black Mesa. Initially, Freeman adopts the live-action commentary of the professional sports broadcaster, a.k.a. the reassuring masculinity of the US sports culture. When repeated attacks cause Freeman's composure to crumble, he retreats to a revanchist nationalism:

Freeman: *frantically swinging crowbar as aliens attack relentlessly*: “Facehuggers! Batter up. Strike one. Strike two. Strike -- augh, it's raining men. I -- I mean, aliens. Why is this taking so long. I could fall faster than this.” *With increasing desperation*: “No, you're doing it wrong. No. Shut up. Noone cares about your opinion. You have no rights. You're all illegal immigrants. Now do what you're told and jump in this giant meat grinder. No, you're doing it wrong, you're all incompetent.”<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of the next episode, Freeman recoils just as quickly from this revanchism into a remarkably progressive cosmopolitanism:

*Freeman treads carefully along a set of enormous pipes welded to a wall, while avoiding falling into an abyss on his left.*

Freeman: “Dammit. How come that catwalk doesn't have any supports? The last one had dangling cables after it collapsed. If I have one of those, I could swing across to the other side like *Tarzan*. That would be dope. They did that in *Star Wars*, too. Dude swinging across a gap with some babe holding on to him.” *Freeman treads carefully along pipe*. “That was a grappling hook, though. That's what this [hazard] suit needs, a grappling hook. Then I could swing my way to victory instead of performing this balancing act. Bugs can crawl on walls. Maybe I should've been a bug. Go Team Kafka! I'd at least want four arms, like the God Shiva.”<sup>20</sup>

The citation of *Tarzan*, one of the oldest adventure franchises of them all, is followed by a reference to the scene in the first *Star Wars* movie when Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia cross an abyss inside the Death Star on a rope. Similarly, the reference to the grappling hook -- a core game-play feature of numerous videogame franchises -- is followed by a reference to the circus high-wire act. The last two lines of dialogue bracket Kafka's classic short story “The Metamorphosis” (1915) as well as South Asian mythology -- a reference to the digital body of the player avatar as well as to the digital labor of South Asian software designers.

This is the expansion of the network effect to include decades-old mass cultural franchises as well as iconic works of 20th century modernism on behalf of a vastly enlarged transnational youth audience. This expansion is accompanied by a remixing of *Half Life's* original game-play, in order to endow Freeman's character with cinematic realism as well as to facilitate audience reception. To that end, Scott carefully choreographs all camera movements in his series, reducing unnecessary movement and adding motion blur in order to avoid triggering 3D motion sickness (so-called “Doom syndrome”) in viewers.<sup>21</sup>

Scott also created a number of custom animations for Freeman which depict narratively plausible actions not permitted by the programming of the original game, e.g. the ability to traverse low-lying obstacles and to climb grates. While some of these animations were created using keyboard commands available to players in the original game, others required considerable programming skill. These animations were carefully designed to be as close to first-person cinematic realism as possible, i.e. Freeman looks around, moves and jumps much as a real person would.

Some of the most interesting examples of this network effect are Scott's satirical meta-commentaries. These latter push against but never quite break the “fourth wall” of the videogame walk-through, in the sense that Freeman deliberately calls the viewers' attention to the glaring

narrative anachronisms of the original videogame, e.g. implausible traps, non-functional corridors and unrealistic level design. Many of these meta-commentaries function as elaborate allusions to the digital commons:

Freeman: *while crawling through an air duct*: “These bugs think they own the place. Well, there's going to be some restructuring around here... Hup – there's another one... That's right, keep running, you little bastard. I see you, thinking you're going to escape.” *Freeman flails wildly with crowbar in all directions, managing to crush one bug*. “Well you're wrong. Just like everyone else here. Rraaahhh!” *Freeman knocks open the grate covering the air duct, and crawls into a room*. “Man, today is so counterintuitive to everything I did at grad school. I would shout and break stuff there, too, but that never got anything done.”<sup>22</sup>

The theme of bug hunting is an artful nod to the animators, machinima makers and coders who must wrestle with Valve's open source graphics software. Like all software, it has its share of defective code, which open source artists must either forestall or somehow work around.<sup>23</sup> The reference to graduate students, however, is significant on two levels. First, graduate students are the prototypical high-skilled, low-paid workers who teach many of the classes at major US universities. Second, whereas international students accounted for than 5% of all US college students in 2010, they comprised 43.7% of all graduate students pursuing their degree in physics.<sup>24</sup> In episode 13, published on July 24, 2009, this theoretical workplace cosmopolitanism is given its concrete social referent:

Freeman: “Wait a minute, that's that cargo hook I swung on. I've been here before. Ughhh... Alright, alright. Well, I'm just going to keep moving forward.” *Freeman climbs ladder, reenters air duct*.  
Freeman: “I'm not ready to believe this entire facility is a giant fucking Moebius strip. Maybe I should become a tour guide after this. I'm good at acting like I know where the hell I'm going. 'Follow me.’” *A small alien creature attacks Freeman from behind, he crushes it with crowbar*.  
Freeman: “Augh! Stop that! You can't follow me! You don't have any money, that's the whole point!”<sup>25</sup>

Given the timing of its release, this might seem to be a reference to the frustrated job aspirations of the US university graduates of the post-2008 period. Two minutes later, however, Scott confounds our expectations by linking warehouse and transportation workers to a non-American branch of the transnational culture-industry:

Freeman: *looking around in disbelief*: “Have I been here, too? ...I don't know. This places starts looking the same after awhile. It's just some never-ending fantasy warehouse.” *Shines flashlight into metal air duct*: “No... I want some Cheetos. Alright, back in this snakehole.” *Reenters air duct, crawls forward*. “This is what it must have been like for the Vietcong. Underground all the time... crawling around in cramped tunnels... American soldiers shooting at you... bugs...”<sup>26</sup>

What gives this quotation of Vietnam's twenty-five-year war of independence against French colonialism and US neocolonialism its virulent sting is the fact that sections of the underground tunnel complexes constructed by the Vietnamese revolutionaries have become popular sites of 21st century tourism.<sup>27</sup> Due to the pragmatic necessity of conducting these tours in English, Mandarin Chinese, Korean and Japanese, many of the workers at these sites are well-educated and have a higher degree of cultural capital than other members of their society.<sup>28</sup> By allowing us to step into the shoes of highly-trained but low-paid Vietnamese culture-workers, the sequence generates a thrilling moment of transnational solidarity between online viewers and the service-sector workers of all nations.

This solidarity marks the eruption of the first open antagonism between Freeman's self-interest as a highly skilled scientist and the self-interest of the plutocrats in extracting maximum profits regardless of the cost to workers, consumers or the planetary ecology. What marks *Freeman's Mind* as a watershed of transnational aesthetics is that it not only gives voice to this class antagonism, but depicts some of the first concrete forms of its mass mobilizations.

There were brief hints of these mobilizations during the first twelve episodes, often in the form of fragmentary asides on the wastefulness of the Black Mesa Research Facility or musings on the incompetence of the rescue mission. By episode 13, however, Freeman has realized that the official response to the alien invasion is not utterly incompetent, it is wholly malevolent. The sole interest of the authorities is erasing the evidence of their culpability in unleashing the alien invasion, by ordering death squads to exterminate the entire scientific corps of Black Mesa.

In short, Freeman has decisively lost his privileged class status as a world-class scientist and become the antagonist of the transnational plutocracy. The conclusion of episode 13 provides a tantalizing glimpse of the narrative energies unleashed by this transformation. While navigating a crawlspace, Freeman reappropriates a conceptual field previously monopolized by the highest-paid strata of culture-workers and tenured university professors, namely the vocation of cultural theory:

Freeman: "I wonder what Freud would've said about me crawling in and out of all these ventilation shafts. Nothing good, I bet. Freud was kind of a nutbar but you have to give him some props. He had the perfect angle. He had all these theories you couldn't disprove." *Freeman unsuccessfully attempts to open a metal grate.*

Freeman: "But yeah, he could say anything he wanted, then claim you repressed the memories of what he was talking about. It's an unbeatable strategy." *Freeman attempts to open another grate, unsuccessfully.*

Freeman: *irritated*: "Come on, come on..." *Freeman notices an open air duct, enters duct.*

Freeman: "Yeah, I wish I had a 'theory' like that. You can't get away with that kind of crap in physics. You have to have serious math to back it up. Well, except for the string theory crowd. Those guys are a bunch of cultists."<sup>29</sup>

This allusion to the mass cultural underpinnings of Freud's critique – the fact that any theory of the unconscious must also be a theory of the mass media – is linked to the social basis of post-Einsteinian physics.<sup>30</sup> A more sophisticated version of this same strategy occurs in episode 16, when Freeman hears a gigantic alien banging against the metal walls of a rocket test chamber. Annoyed with the racket, Freeman hilariously -- but productively -- misquotes Nietzsche:

Freeman: “What was that Nietzsche said? He who fights drummers should see to it that in the process he does not become a drummer? Or was it monsters? I don't know. Same thing, really... no, it had to be drummers. That's a monster [referring to the tentacled alien], and there's no way I'm going to end up looking like that thing. I wonder if Nietzsche was in a band. I bet he was. I should look him up when I get out of here. I'll bet the songs have deep lyrics.”<sup>31</sup>

Nietzsche's famous aphorism had a crucial second sentence, namely the power of the abyss to look back at its viewer.<sup>32</sup> Scott rewrites the Nietzschean tropes of the monstrous imperial self and the colonial abyss into tropes of the digital music producer (in the original game, the tentacled alien lashes out in the direction of anything which makes a discernible noise) and the videogame avatar which stares (or in the case of Freeman, shouts) back at its creator.

Digital music and videogames have long been two of the most sensitive indicators of the spread of transnational media in the early 21st century.<sup>33</sup> The unveiling of these two tropes in *Freeman's Mind* marks two significant shifts in the series. The first is the sharpening of its critique of Wall Street speculators into a broader critique of the planetary plutocracy. For example, there is a scene later in episode 16 wherein Freeman briefly muses on the possibility of becoming wealthy from the gargantuan level of military spending which will be required to fight the alien invasion.<sup>34</sup> Moments later, this potential Cold War revanchism recoils into a scathing denunciation of the plutocratic demolition of US public education:

Freeman: “I guess the big danger to such massive defense spending is that we might end up as a military city-state at perpetual war with aliens, like *Starship Troopers*. What's that noise?” *Freeman notices two aliens who have taken over the bodies of scientists, waiting to ambush him.*

Freeman: “Oh, someone thinks they're smarter than me, eh? I don't need to dignify this.” *Freeman shoots aliens.*

Freeman: “You don't even have a degree! Actually, your host bodies had degrees around here, but you're just latching on to that. That's even worse than one of those online degrees. You're a parasite in every way.”<sup>35</sup>

The madness of the post-2001 US War on Terror and its vast expenditure of funds on illusory enemies converges with the lunacy of the privatization of US public education, a.k.a. the destruction of public schools and their replacement by test mills, the firing of highly skilled educators and their replacement by low-wage test proctors, and the demolition of libraries, music and arts programs for the benefit of textbook and computer monopolists.<sup>36</sup>

The second shift is the emergence of a new kind of transnational awareness linked to the daily institutions of interactive media and the practices of the digital commons. This awareness is not yet a coherent set of political beliefs or ideologies. Rather, it is the consciousness of class which precedes the emergence of class consciousness. The single most memorable expression of this consciousness of class was the 2011-2014 planetary wave of mass protests against plutocracy, the first geopolitical manifestation of transnational audiences in world history. These

protests did not invent new political forms to occupy national political spaces, so much as transform national spaces into nodes of a henceforth transnational politics.

While the first two years of *Freeman's Mind* make occasional references to the class antagonisms between the Wall Street plutocrats and the skilled scientific workers of the United States, it is no accident that the first sign of the transnational consciousness of class occurs in episode 18, published on November 2, 2009. This is the moment when Freeman must escape from a stopped elevator:

Freeman: *while elevator creaks ominously*: “Okay, I'm in a rickety-ass elevator that's creaking -- what do I do. Get... off it? Okay, that looks like a pipe. Looks like it might go somewhere. Don't think I have a lot of options.” *Creaks become louder*.

Freeman: *hurriedly*: “Okay, I -- I can jump this. And the irony is, it's probably going to be one of the safer jumps I've done this morning. Assuming I don't die.” *Freeman jumps the gap and successfully clings to the pipe. A split second later, the elevator plunges down the shaft and crashes into a pool of toxic waste.*

Freeman: *exultant*: “Oh, man... I climbed my way to safety! I am a monkey god!” *While climbing down the pipe, Freeman imitates the triumphant ululations of an ape, reaches the ledge and gazes at the pool of toxic waste.*

Freeman: “That could be me right now – a toxic human French fry. But no – my simian skills saw me safely.”<sup>37</sup>

This sequence links two videogame references and one science fiction reference to the phenomenon of peer cultural production in the digital era. The first reference is a nod towards machinima production, inasmuch as climbing down the pipe is not possible in the original game (players had to jump onto a nearby ladder instead). The second is to Sony's *Ape Escape* and Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* platformer videogame franchises, wherein players steer monkey avatars through maps comprised of timed jumps and traversal puzzles. The science fiction reference is relayed by Freeman's play-acting as a monkey, the satirical reversal of the hegemonic depiction of simians in British and US science fiction literature and mass media as the brutish and racialized Other of civilizing empires.<sup>38</sup>

This play-acting culminates in the final two lines, wherein Freeman's escape from the cooking of French fries -- the classic symbol of low-wage food service workers in the US -- is enabled by the exercise of “simian skills”. The ingenious word-play of the sentence is a nod towards the transnational networks of informal and non-commercial cultural labor which emerged during the 1990s and 2000s, everywhere from digital photography to free-to-view video channels, from hip hop and electronic music to slam poetry, and from independent theater to interactive media.

All of these networks exist in a state of continuous struggle against corporate media monopolies as well as against national regulatory systems largely beholden to commercial interests. Episodes 19 through 24 of *Freeman's Mind* refer to these struggles indirectly, everywhere from the forms of digital peer production facilitated by Valve's digital distribution service, Steam,<sup>39</sup> and the ecological despoliation wrought by Black Mesa's production facilities,<sup>40</sup> to the bohemian haircuts and dissident political opinions of Freeman's fellow scientists.<sup>41</sup> By episode 23, Freeman's critique of an uninformative map sparks a discussion of 21st century

digital cartography, 20th century manual drafting, and 19th century colonial smuggling.<sup>42</sup>

Yet it is not until episode 25 of *Freeman's Mind*, published on March 8, 2010, that these struggles are given a concrete historical framework. This is the moment Scott cites one of the most powerful literary innovations of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, namely the neo-slave narrative. These latter tell the stories of the enslaved, enserfed, and indentured laborers of the post-1492 capitalist world-system.<sup>43</sup>

Because these laborers left few written records or other forms of documentation behind, neo-slave narratives perform the difficult task of reconstructing an entire historical archive along with the specific tale they wish to tell. Here is Scott's quotation of the neo-slave narrative:

Freeman: "I have to fix everything in this damned building. This isn't my job." *Freeman starts electric tram back up.*

Freeman: "See, this is what we need slaves for. I think we really screwed up the handling of that as a nation. We were only enslaving black people. That's stupid. That's redneck reasoning. We should've just freed the existing slaves, wiped the slate clean, and grabbed new slaves from a larger pool. Like if you play the lottery. You can win a million dollars, or you can become a slave for life if you pick the wrong number. That's a better risk versus reward balance. I mean, what the hell kind of risk is a one dollar ticket. Do the same thing for voting, getting a driver's license... have a new system where every society member has a small risk to become a slave – except me."<sup>44</sup>

Whereas Freeman's character previously oscillated between the progressive and revanchist wings of late 20th century US identity-politics, here the oscillation is between two periods of plutocratic excess -- that of the US elites of the late 19th century, and that of the US elites of the early 21st century. What gives the passage its satirical sting is the recognition that the political revanchism of the twilight of US hegemony resonates with the revanchism of its hegemonic dawn: yesterday's Jim Crow heralds today's War on Drugs, yesterday's predatory trusts and cartels foreshadow today's banksters and information monopolies, and yesterday's invasions of Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico anticipate the contemporary neocolonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>45</sup> This historical insight opens the door to Freeman's first overt discussion of labor exploitation, a.k.a. the extraction of unpaid labor-time from US service-sector workers<sup>46</sup> and the hyper-exploitation of digital audiences in the industrializing nations.<sup>47</sup>

By the same token, Freeman remains ideologically ambivalent vis-a-vis these two plutocracies, due to the lingering belief that his credentials and citizenship will allow him to somehow escape the doom of plutocratic immiseration. One of the most striking expressions of this ambivalence is a mock pirate episode, released as an April Fools' Day joke for the fan community on April 1, 2010. Rather than playing the part of the roguish but ultimately harmless Hollywood pirate, Scott employs the historically accurate vocabulary and diction of a ruthless 18th century privateer:

Freeman: *in the raspy voice of a pirate*: "Ah, what do we have here." *Freeman approaches soft-drink machine.* "An anti-scurvy machine." *Aliens jump from ceiling and attack.*

Freeman: *fighting them off*: "Shiver me timbers! By the powers, there be all manner of queer beasties in

this hold. I cares not for 'em.” *Freeman notices a nearby room boarded up with wooden planks.*

Freeman: “Now, what booty be so special here, if he weren't guardin', I asks?” *Freeman smashes planks with crowbar.*

Freeman: “I aims to find out.” *Enters room, notices security guard standing in room.*

Freeman: “Arrr, this must be the brig.” *Before the guard can respond, an alien teleports behind Freeman.*

Freeman: “You stinkin' bilge rat!” *Freeman shoots alien.*

Freeman: “I swears, the men behind this mess will all swing for sure.” *To security guard:* “How there, squire? What say ye to joinin' me crew? I gives ye my affy-davy [affidavit] I give ya [you] a cut of any loot we take.”

Security guard: “Okay, why not. I didn't want to die alone anyway.”

Freeman: “Yarr! That be the spirit! Let us charge forth and paint the walls red with blood!”<sup>48</sup>

On the surface, this episode is an extended homage to the digital commons, where transnational audiences have battled for decades against corporate attempts to criminalize non-commercial file-sharing as theft.<sup>49</sup> On a deeper level, this episode complicates the national historical framework of episode 25, by revealing the transnational constellation which created the United States in the first place.

This constellation is that of the British, Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese maritime colonialisms which created Atlantic chattel slavery as well as the world's first globally integrated financial and trading system between 1492 and 1775. The ambivalence of Freeman's pirate persona, halfway between Bluebeard's forthright marauding and the anguished confession of Coleridge's mariner, expresses the ambivalence at the heart of the first cycle of anti-colonial national insurrections which erupted on three continents between 1775 and 1810.<sup>50</sup>

Just as the Atlantic and Western European insurrections were based on a fragile anti-colonial coalition between merchants, nobilitarian elites and plantocrats seeking higher profits on the one hand, and fully waged, partly waged and wageless workers seeking higher wages, personal emancipation and cheap land on the other, so too is Freeman located halfway between the antipodes of today's planetary plutocracy and the transnational proletariat. Occasionally, this ambivalence gives rise to revanchist fantasies of predatory neocolonialism, as with this moment in episode 28 where Freeman fantasizes about leveraging his First World status in the Third World:

Freeman: “I really am bummed they've identified me, though. That means I'm a fugitive now. So they've probably frozen my bank accounts. I need to get back to Massachusetts. I have about ten thousand dollars in gold buried in Harold Parker State Forest that I put there for exactly this kind of situation. Now I didn't anticipate I was going to get framed like this. I put it there so in case I got caught embezzling I would have some sort of exit strategy. Now, granted, ten thousand will only get me so far here. But if I can make it to India, I can live like a king with that kind of money. The American dollar goes a lot farther over there. [in basic Hindi:] *Maiṁ apanē na'e bhagavāna hūṁ*. *Mērē sāmanē ghuṭanē* [translation: I am your new god. Kneel before me.] I'm going to need a fake ID.”<sup>51</sup>

More commonly, this ambivalence gives rise to sequences which highlight the underlying antagonisms between transnational workers and plutocratic elites, but which do not yet express

the class position of the former. For example, episode 29 contains a pungent satire of the globe-straddling supply and distribution networks of transnational capitalism which employs a dense network of references to 20th century US children's media and Japanese videogame franchises:

Freeman: *watching metal transport boxes hanging from moving conveyor belts on the ceiling*: “Huh, guess the alien disaster isn't slowing production any. Gotta keep those shareholders happy. Today's episode is brought to you by the number 8. Just what are we shipping, anyway. These look like engine parts –” *On the other side of the tram track, soldiers seem to pop out of a wooden box and start shooting at Freeman.*

Freeman: *while shooting back*: “Oh god! No! Stop! Stop that! Stop!” *Freeman defeats soldiers.*

Freeman: “What the f--k? Did they just pop out of a box? Why were they in a box? That's Loony Tunes crap! Jesus. Well, they caught me off-guard, I'll give them that. I wonder if that was their idea or if it came from up the chain of command. Yeah, I could envision some cigar-smoking general ordering this.”

Freeman: *imitating the voice of a raspy general*: “Yeah, put two soldiers in a box! When the enemy approaches, they just jump out. It's brilliant.”

Freeman: *in normal voice*: “I bet they're both named Jack, too.”<sup>52</sup>

First of all, Freeman's seemingly offhand comment about the number eight is an allusion to the popular children's show broadcast on US public television, *Sesame Street*, which has a long history of satirizing commercial advertisements (e.g. “today's episode is brought to you by the letter R”). Second, the theme of soldiers hiding in boxes is an allusion to the core game-play of Kojima's stealth espionage franchise *Metal Gear Solid* (1987-2015), one of the most consistent and stinging critics of US imperialism in videogame history.<sup>53</sup> Third, Loony Tunes is one of the oldest children's animation channels in the US, featuring characters such as Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. The final allusion to the jack-in-the-box, a children's toy, plays on the fact that videogames were originally a spin-off of the children's toy industry in the late 1970s.<sup>54</sup>

What is still missing, to be sure, is the perspective of the transnational workers who operate and maintain these distribution networks. This is the specific contribution of episode 32, which shows Freeman's tottering faith in his imperial privilege on the cusp of a complete meltdown:

*Freeman inhales after narrowly escaping drowning in a flooded corridor.*

Freeman: *inhaling*: “Air is good... we have a working relationship. Okay, I'm pretty sure nobody followed me in here, so I've got that going for me. I have supply concerns about the air in this room, though. Business needs to expand. We need more investors, which I guess would be... plants?” *Freeman notices worms in water.*

Freeman: *shouting*: “Not worms. Worms are not conducive to good business.”

Freeman: *normal voice*: “Look at this. They're trying to take over the market. I need to withdraw. I'm taking my assets with me and I'm going to look for business opportunities elsewhere.” *Freeman dives into water and proceeds further down the flooded corridor. After fifteen seconds, Freeman finds another air pocket and inhales.*

Freeman: *treading water*: “Ugh... this is a tight market. No matter. Here at Freeman Industries, we practice sound investment strategies.” *Freeman dives into the water again. Freeman tries and fails to unlock a flooded door, comes up for air one more time.*

Freeman: “Okay, don't panic, don't panic, don't panic... I'm sure there's... minutes worth of air in this pocket...”

Freeman: *suddenly shouting*: “Panic --”<sup>55</sup>

'Freeman Industries' is the pungent satire of one of the most powerful ideologies of the 21st century, namely the notion that everyone is their very own individual enterprise or start-up, and can thus dispense with any notion of collective solidarity. The lingering fiction of Freeman Industries falls to pieces completely later in the same episode, when Freeman has a narrow escape from a giant alien fish:

Freeman: *furious*: “You want to eat me? I'll give you something to eat. You think I work at Sea World? Giving you free food all day? You're going to have to pay for this meal. Come on up, I won't hurt you. Come on up.” *Alien fish resurfaces.*

Freeman: *mocking*: “Sucker.” *Freeman fires and kills alien fish.*

Freeman: *yelling*: “Yeah! Call me Ishmael, bitch!”

Freeman: *normal voice*: “Stupid shark, that take some of the fight out of you? Oh! Almost forgot about you!” *Freeman starts shooting tentacled aliens hanging on ceiling.*

Freeman: “Oop, need to reload.” *Freeman shoots remaining tentacled aliens while whistling 'Blow the Man Down'.*

Freeman: “Looks like I cleaned everything up. I am a bad ass pool boy. This water still looks nasty, though. But I'm not going back.” *Freeman dives into water, resurfaces near metal ledge.*

Freeman: “Okay, more pull ups.” *Freeman climbs onto ledge.*

Freeman: “Man, I'm going to be ripped after today. Now I need to hit the clubs more than ever. Hell, maybe I still can. If I get out of state, the Feds aren't going to be looking for me in night clubs. I'll drive to Dallas. There's bound to be something popping there.”<sup>56</sup>

What intermediates between Melville's *Moby Dick*, that magnificent allegory of the burgeoning internal contradictions which would explode in the US Civil War nine years after the novel's publication, and the transnational health club and fitness industries of the 21st century is the trope of the poolboy: the transnational service worker who whistles downloaded versions of sea shanties. In the very next episode, the theme of the transnational worker is given an even more intriguing twist:

*Freeman must jump across a flooded passageway. The only path is through a hole torn in a metal grate.*

Freeman: “Okay people, let's hear our options. Macintyre, you first. Well, I don't really want to get back into the water this quarter. For starters, I just killed a shark. Okay. And, I saw something swimming down there, so how can that be good. Knox, what do you think? Ah, see I thought of that too [referring to the gaping hole in the metal fence]. But the big gaping hole strategy is flawed due to the ragged chunks of metal surrounding it. No, gentlemen, I think there's only one course for our company. Allow me to demonstrate.” *Freeman jumps and climbs along metal grate.*

Freeman: “Yeah, I'd like to see a fish do this. I think this proves that, in addition to aliens, I am superior to fish as well. There's... dammit --” *Freeman falls into the water.*

Freeman: *resurfaces*: “I'm starting to get pretty sick of all this swimming...” *Freeman climbs out of water.*

Freeman: "I don't think this suit's really designed for it. I'm all waterlogged. I can't have that. That's how Bruce Lee died, too much water in his brain. Of course, I don't think that happened to him from swimming. It was painkillers or something. But then, hey, look at me. I am the Bruce Lee of physics."  
Freeman: *imitating Bruce Lee's onscreen martial arts utterances*: "Wickashaw!"<sup>57</sup>

The trope which mediates between Macintyre, the skilled worker of the transnational sports industry, and Bruce Lee, the transnational superstar of the Hong Kong films, is Freeman's performative leap onto to the grate. Given that the original *Half Life* game did not allow players to perform this move, this sequence is essentially a reflexive reference to the machinima director as a new kind of skilled transnational laborer.

What is not yet clear, on the other hand, is how the non-commercial networks of production and distribution crucial to machinima relate to the transnational cultural oligopolies of production and distribution exemplified by Disney, not to mention the information oligopolies exemplified by Google. Nor is it yet clear how skilled transnational laborers relate to unskilled transnational laborers. The result is the unmistakable grinding of narrative gears in episode 34, when the long-running oscillation in Freeman's monologues between a revanchist neo-nationalism and a progressive cosmopolitanism erupts into open conflict:

Freeman: "This whole neighborhood's going to hell. What with the gangs..." *Freeman shoots aliens.*  
Freeman: "Yep... can't even walk down the street of your own planet anymore. I remember the good old days, when I didn't have to bring a gun to work... my coworkers weren't space bugs... I had a salary... I wasn't wanted by the government..." *Alien teleports in front of Freeman, begins to attack.*  
Freeman: *yelling*: "Then you happened!" *Freeman shoots alien, but is hit in the back by a bolt of electricity by a different alien.*  
Freeman: "Ow! Was I shot in the back of the --" *Freeman spins around, shoots other alien.*  
Freeman: *in disgust*: "No respect, man. No respect at all."

Freeman: *in exaggerated rural accent*: “Goddamn outworlders are ruining this country.”

Freeman: *normal voice*: “There was a time when we'd put you all in cages. And if it was up to me, it'd still be that way. Some of you keep zapping me with electricity. That means you're a power source. We should be taking advantage of that. This is all so wasteful.”<sup>58</sup>

Freeman's final overt display of revanchism and the post-2001 xenophobia of the Terror War, at this point wholly satirical, suddenly recoils into a covert parable of renewable energy production. The insoluble contradiction here is that this revanchism is tied to the rule of the US empire, precisely where the progressive vision of a renewable energy economy is tied to the transnational institutions of the digital commons. To understand why and how Scott responded to this contradiction not by retreating back to national revanchism or indulging in empty utopianism, but through the relentless critical analysis of what exists, we must turn to the specific constellation of the first great wave of anti-plutocratic mass struggle between 2011 and 2014 and its relationship to post-2008 geopolitics.

1. Machinima works have significant similarities to the playable videogame mods created by skilled amateurs for various videogame franchises. While machinima are not interactive experiences in their own right, they generally cite or quote videogames for their narrative raw material.
2. Valve Software is an independent videogame and digital network services firm founded in 1996 by three former employees of Microsoft. Thanks to its roots as a PC gaming firm and its egalitarian internal culture, Valve understood the futility of trying to impose 20th-century broadcast monopolies on the transnational videogame market. The various iterations of Valve's *Half Life* franchise have sold an estimated 9.3 million official copies between 1998 and 2008, catapulting Valve from an obscure start-up into one of the leading videogame studios in the world. Valve's other prominent franchises include *Portal* and *Left for Dead*. Chris Remo. "Analysis: Valve's Lifetime Retail Sales For Half-Life, Counter-Strike Franchises." *Gamasutra*. December 8, 2008. [http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=21319](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=21319).
3. The videogame walkthrough has a long and complex prehistory ranging from standup comedy and theatrical improvisation to the live-action television series and the online comedy series. In retrospect, three US and Canadian media series served as important precedents for *Freeman's Mind*. These included the televised comedy series *Mystery Science Fiction Theater 3000* (1989-1999), the machinima series *Red Vs. Blue* (2003-2007), and the web comedy series *Tiki Bar TV* (2005-2009). *Mystery Science Fiction Theater 3000*, created by Joel Hodgson, was a long-running comedy cable television show which remixed clips of B-grade science fiction, horror, and pulp films together with recorded improvised commentary. *Red Vs. Blue* (2003-2007) was a popular machinima series directed by Michael Burns and Matt Hullum. Burns and Hullum refunctioned the multiplayer component of Bungie's *Halo* videogame to create a long-running sketch comedy which satirized many of the conventions of the multiplayer shooter, including its affinity to imperial masculinity. *Tiki Bar TV* was an independent comedy web-series comprising forty-five episodes, which ran from 2005 to 2009. The brainchild of Canadian performers Jeff Macpherson, Kevin Gamble, and Lara Doucette, *Tiki Bar TV* was a satirical version of an online cocktail show, combining comedy improvisation with a do-it-yourself tiki bar and actual cocktail recipes displayed for viewers during each show. It was also one of the first series to rely exclusively on digital distribution platforms such as iTunes. See: Robert G. Weiner and Shelley E. Barba, editors. *In the Peanut Gallery with Mystery Science Theater 3000 : Essays on Film, Fandom, Technology, and the Culture of Riffing*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011. <http://www.tikibartv.com/>.
4. After the first episode of the series was published, Scott conducted an online poll of the fan community asking them whether they wanted additional *Freeman's Mind* episodes. Fans voted to continue the series by an overwhelming margin. Ross Scott (blog). December 5, 2007. <http://www.accursedfarms.com/appendum/>.
5. From March 2006 until July 2010, Youtube restricted the length of user-uploaded videos to 10 minutes. From July 2010 until December 2010, the length limit was raised to 15 minutes. After December 2010, the limit was further extended to a maximum of 12 hours for users in good standing. <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2010/07/upload-limit-increases-to-15-minutes.html>
6. Nick Dyer-Witford and Greig de Peuter have argued convincingly that shooter franchises such as *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield* and *Halo* embody some of the worst aspects of neoliberal ideology – in particular, the celebration of a repressive imperial masculinity whose role was to safeguard the rule of the plutocracy. Between 1992 and 2012, the best-selling shooter franchises included *Call of Duty* (214.6 million official copies sold), *Halo* (60.0 million), *Battlefield* (40.8 million), *Medal of Honor*

(37.4 million), and *Gears of War* (20.4 million). All data is compiled by VGChartz.com. <http://www.vgchartz.com/gamedb/>.

7. Marc Laidlaw, a veteran science-fiction and fantasy writer, wrote a scenario in which human beings and aliens fight against an occupying army of interstellar invaders called the Combine, who practice a biological as well as political colonialism. Predictably, the worst villains of the *Half Life* series are the comprador human elites who ally themselves with the Combine. It should also be noted that the shooter as a genre need not be pro-imperialist. Insomniac's *Resistance* franchise portrayed humanity's struggle against an interstellar neocolonialism, while Irrational Games' *Bioshock* (2007) and *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) provide thoughtful albeit limited critiques of the neoimperialism of the videogame shooter as a form. Guerilla's *Killzone* franchise has also been somewhat critical of the ideologies of empire and neocolonialism.

8. Valve's original dialogue at the beginning of *Half Life 2*: "Rise and shine, Mr. Freeman, rise and shine. Not that I wish to imply you have been sleeping on the job. Noone is more deserving of a rest and all the effort in the world would have gone to waste, until... well, let's just say your hour has come again. The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world. So wake up, Mr. Freeman, wake up and smell the ashes." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRtT4HHQef0>. The reference to Youtube refers to Ross Scott's unhappy experience with Machinima.com, which was once one of the leading channels featuring the works of machinima creators on Youtube. Over time, Machinima's priorities shifted away from showcasing independent artists and towards pure profit-seeking, causing Scott to leave the channel in 2012, a story we will describe more closely later in this work.

9. Nomi Prins (blog). <http://nomiprins.com>. Matt Taibbi (blog). [www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/taibblog](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/taibblog). *New Economic Perspectives* (blog). <http://neweconomicperspectives.com>. Bill Moyers, *Bill Moyers and Company*. <http://billmoyers.com>. Paul Jay's *Real News Network*. <http://therealnews.com>. Joseph Stiglitz. "The GFC: Where are we now and what can be done about it?". July 7, 2014. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZzKUrzNMXA>. Yanis Varoufakis (blog). <http://yanisvaroufakis.eu/>.

10. In March of 2012, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, an official Federal agency, estimated that total US student debt topped the \$1 trillion mark. Web: <http://www.consumerfinance.gov/blog/too-big-to-fail-student-debt-hits-a-trillion/>. At the end of 2013, almost four years after the end of the 2009 recession, European youth unemployment was 58.3% in Greece, 55% in Spain, 49.7% in Croatia, 40% in Italy, 38.9% in Cyprus, 38.1% in Portugal, 33.7% in Slovakia, 28.4% in Bulgaria, 27.3% in Poland, 27.2% in Hungary, 26.8% in Ireland, 24.8% in France, 23.7% in Belgium, 23.6% in Sweden and Romania, 23.2% in Latvia, 21.9% in Lithuania, 21.6% in Slovenia, and 20.5% in the UK. Normal rates of youth unemployment averaged between ten to fifteen percent. Eurostat. [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product\\_details/dataset?p\\_product\\_code=TIPSLM80](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product_details/dataset?p_product_code=TIPSLM80).

11. Data from ITU cited in: <https://www.internetsociety.org/globalinternetreport/2016/data-and-trends/>.

12. Prior to 2011, the major protests against plutocracy were limited to national electoral politics, e.g. the four successive Chavez presidencies of Venezuela which began in 1998, Lula's election to the Presidency of Brazil in 2002, Evo Morales' election to the Presidency of Bolivia in 2005, Pakistan's democracy movement of 2008, the 2009 Green protest movement of Iran, and the 2010 democratic revolution of Kyrgyzstan. After 2011, however, these national struggles began to take the form of

transnational constellations. The Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan and Yemeni revolutions and the Occupy protest movements against neoliberalism in the US and EU all occurred between 2011 and 2012, mass protests occurred in Brazil, Turkey and the Kurdish region of Syria in late 2012 and 2013, while 2014 witnessed the democratic revolution of Ukraine, the election of Jokowi Widodo to the Presidency of Indonesia, and the pro-democracy protests of Hong Kong.

13. It should be noted that the theme of employment was already prominent in the original *Half Life* videogame, most notably in the very first and very last scripted sequences. The opening ten minutes of the videogame showcase Gordon Freeman, a newly-minted PhD in particle physics, reporting for his first day of work at a secret Government laboratory. An announcer welcomes Freeman to the facility, and then talks about the various work-related duties and programs for employees. Conversely, the very end of *Half Life* also invokes the job market and the possibility of continued employment.

14. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 2, 2:50-3:29. December 27, 2007.

15. The field of quantum chromodynamics is a decades-old theory of the subatomic interactions between quarks and gluons. Greiner, Walter and Schäfer, Andreas. *Quantum Chromodynamics*. Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1995.

16. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 5, 2:31-3:08. October 3, 2008.

17. While episode 5 was created in 2008, the sequence eerily anticipates two of the worst workplace disasters of Bangladesh: the notorious 2012 textile factory fire in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, which killed 117 workers and injured over 200, and the Savar building collapse of 2013, which killed 1,134 workers. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013\\_Savar\\_building\\_collapse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Savar_building_collapse).  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Dhaka\\_fire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Dhaka_fire).

18. The progressive ones include the anti-globalization movement of 1999-2000 and the Occupy movement of 2011-2012, while the reactionary ones include the US wave of xenophobia during 2001-2004, the surge of Far Right populism in the countries of the European Union after 2008, and the authoritarian kleptocracy which took power in the US in 2016.

19. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 6, 4:29-4:58. December 9, 2008.

20. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 7, 0:06-0:44. December 21, 2008.

21. Motion sickness was a common problem for players of the original *Half Life* as well as many other first-person shooters of the 1990s, due to the lack of realistic visual cues in early videogames and rapid shifts of camera perspective. While most post-2008 videogames employ a range of techniques to minimize or eliminate motion sickness, motion sickness remains a key issue for one of the most important subgenres of videogame culture, namely fan walkthroughs. The most successful and popular of these latter are those wherein players avoid jumpy, excessive first-person camera movement. This means that the player will move in a straight line and at consistent speeds, limit dodging and jumping, and orient the screen around predictable visual landmarks -- the videogame equivalent of how car passengers avoid car-sickness by focusing on the horizon, rather than staring at objects to their immediate left and right.

22. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 8, 1:43-2:08. January 16, 2009.

23. Scott released footage of some of the most entertaining of these Source engine bugs with explanatory text commentary as a postscript in episode 68, the finale of the series.

24. This is data from a National Science Foundation survey, summarized in a report by the NFAP. Stuart Anderson. "The Importance of International Students to America." *National Foundation for American Policy Brief*, July 2013. <http://www.nfap.com/pdf/New%20NFAP%20Policy%20Brief%20The%20Importance%20of%20International%20Students%20to%20America,%20July%202013.pdf>.

25. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 13, 3:50-4:24. July 24, 2009.

26. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 13, 5:38-5:48. July 24, 2009.

27. The Government of Vietnam maintains an official website on the tunnels of Cu Chi: <http://www.cuchitunnel.org.vn/>.

28. According to the Ministry of Culture, Sport & Tourism of Vietnam, about 22% of the 4.2 million international tourists who visited Vietnam in 2008 were from Chinese-speaking countries and territories, 18% were from English-speaking countries or regions, 9% from South Korea and 8% from Japan.

29. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 13, 7:42-8:24. July 24, 2009.

30. Freud's ground-breaking *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) decoded the anxieties and aspirations of a group of mostly Jewish and highly educated Viennese professionals in terms of what might be called the "Austrian unconscious" – the identity-politics of nobilitarian status, wealth, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality and occupation inside a dynastic empire seething with explosive internal contradictions. Freud's greatest contribution was the insight that human psychology is neither natural nor immutable, but historically produced. This means the psyche is capable of some degree of transformation, either through internal (self-willed) or external (socially mandated) means. The reflexive revolution of Einstein in physics, namely the fact that the observer's position could not be separated from the observed universe, parallels the revolution of Freud in cultural analysis, namely the fact that the evolution of individual identities cannot be separated from the evolution of social identities.

31. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 16, 0:54-1:19. October 5, 2009.

32. Nietzsche's original commentary, written in 1886: "Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein." ["Whoever fights with monsters should take care not to turn thereby into a monster. And if you gaze into an abyss for long, the abyss also gazes into you."] Aphorism 146. Friedrich Nietzsche. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/7204/pg7204.html>.

33. In the musical field, the genres which once typified US cultural hegemony -- blues, jazz, rhythm-and-blues, gospel, rock and hip hop -- became templates of transnational musical networks no longer monopolized by the US recording industry or limited to the circuits of US audiences by the late 1990s. The same process took slightly longer in the field of interactive media, due to the slightly greater

computing resources required by most videogames. By 2008, console monopolists and commercial studios had lost their exclusive control over videogames, and by 2010, videogames were co-produced, co-distributed and co-critiqued by tens of millions of players.

34. Freeman: “The US is certain to dump boatloads into defense spending on top of what we already have. There's going to be a lot of trickling down to research and development. Hell, I could be driving a Porsche before the year's out.” *Freeman's Mind*, episode 16, 2:05-2:16. October 5, 2009.

There is a more evolved version of same moment in episode 33, where a design anachronism of the original *Half Life* gives Freeman the opportunity to critique the plutocratic state:

Freeman: “It's obvious what's going on here. It's the same as the crate-smashing room. If we don't spend a billion dollars one year, then we don't get a billion dollars the next year. And if we don't get a billion dollars the next year, then we have to go and spend more money on lobbyists to get the laws changed, so that we get our billion dollars the year after that. And nobody wants that, because then we might have to compete with other lobbyists. We could get into a bidding war. That's how democracy works. On the other hand, the nutcracker room here is a sure thing. I make fun of it, but in the long run, it's probably faster and cheaper just to build a giant nutcracker, write it off, and be done with it.”

35. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 16, 2:23-2:49. October 5, 2009.

36. Diane Ravitch remains the single greatest critic of the privatization juggernaut which ravaged the US public educational system after the 1970s. Diane Ravitch. *Reign of Error: The Hoax of teh Privatization Movement*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2013.

37. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 18, 1:40-1:59. November 2, 2009.

38. These hegemonic depictions include the *Tarzan* novels and films, the *King Kong* films, and the *Planet of the Apes* television series and films.

39. For example, this line in episode 19 is a recondite inside joke about the independent media producers who sell digital hats and other items to players of Valve's online multiplayer videogame *Team Fortress 2*:

Freeman: *while looking at alien tentacles*: “What if this is the monster's hair strands or something -- the rest of it teleported inside the earth. It's wearing me and this entire facility as a hat. I'm not sure how I feel about that. I wouldn't go so far as to say I feel dirty, but it's... strange.” *Freeman's Mind*, episode 19, 4:10-4:20. November 12, 2009.

From the standpoint of the corporate media, the cultural networks of the digital peer economy are indeed alien growths which threaten to take over the commercial media from within.

40. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 20, 3:52-4:25. November 16, 2009.

41. Freeman: “You know, now that I think about it, the Einstein look is really just the Karl Marx look, just without the beard.” *Freeman's Mind*, episode 20, 5:56-6:00. November 16, 2009.

42. Freeman: “That map has to be bogus. It only lists one area as being dangerous. It needs to have, like, thirty. You could even write 'here be dragons' on it and that would almost be more accurate than nothing at all. Yeah, see, it doesn't even list... F-seven-twelve-D-H. How could you forget to put that down? I mean, I would have

named it Hell Pit 48, but if the cartographer doesn't care about that name, then who will? I guess they just looked up the Autocad layout and took some numbers off of that to feel important. Speaking of which, why do drafters always listen to country music? I never figured that out. What's the correlation/connection there? Is it whiskey?" *Faroff rumbling sound and cry of giant alien.*

Freeman: "Sounds like somebody's smuggling an elephant up there." *Freeman's Mind*, episode 23, 3:04-3:48. November 28, 2009.

43. For the formal definition of the genre, see: Rushy, Ashraf H. A. "Neo-slave narrative", in: William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris, editors. *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997 (533-535). The canonic neo-slave narratives include Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1984), Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), and Evelyne Trouillot's *Rosalie the Infamous* (2003).

44. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 25, 6:23-7:02. March 8, 2010.

45. For the classic text on how the criminalization of drug addiction since the mid-1970s has reprised the toxic social polarization of Jim Crow, see: Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

46. Freeman: "You know what the ridiculous thing about all this is --" *He pauses to shoot alien.*

Freeman: "The ridiculous thing is – hey, a switch." *Freeman pulls switch, opening bridge to next area.* Freeman: "It's not only that he chooses this line of work but he's probably getting paid pretty well for this, with hazard pay. Meanwhile, I'm caught in the middle of this and I'm not getting paid anything. I'm basically doing volunteer work right now. These are community service hours." *Freeman's Mind*, episode 25, 8:33-8:48. March 8, 2010.

To understand the joke, readers should know that community service hours are both a common form of punishment in the US and a deliberately punitive requirement for eligibility for welfare benefits such as Food Stamps.

47. Freeman: "All this security must be to protect something. I bet we have gnomes down there mining precious metals and gems. I want a gnome. Damn, there's another alien." *Freeman shoots alien.*

Freeman: "I'd put my gnome in a cage and feed him granola. I think they'd eat that. Ah, who am I kidding, if the aliens got down there, they would've eaten them all anyway. Gnomes are small. Wait, are gnomes even real?" *Freeman's Mind*, episode 26, 0:23-0:44. March 24, 2010.

Fantasy races have long served as narrative proxies of the racialized Other in role-playing videogames, in much the same way humanoid aliens embody the racialized Other in science fiction. In this case, the racial subtext of the gnomes are "gold farmers", low-wage workers located primarily in industrializing nations who perform menial tasks inside digital open worlds in order to accumulate digital items to be resold to wealthier players. See: Richard Heeks (2010). "Gaming for Profits: Real Money from Virtual Worlds." *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/real-money-from-virtual-worlds/>.

48. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 27, 3:34-4:26. April 1, 2010.

49. The mobilizations of these transnational audiences range from the mass adoption of open source software platforms such as Linux and Android to the creation of Pirate Parties in several nations of the European Union, and from the creation of digital rights organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation to contemporary mass campaigns for net neutrality.

50. The most significant of these insurrections include the uprising of the thirteen British North American colonies in 1775, the Patriot uprising of the United Provinces from 1780-1787, the French revolution of 1789, the Brabant uprising of Belgium in 1790, the Haitian revolution of 1791, and the national insurrections of the future Argentina, Chile, New Granada, Mexico and Peru in 1810.

51. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 28, 7:59-8:40. May 26, 2010.

52. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 29, 3:15-3:59. August 16, 2010.

53. The narrative peak of the entire *Metal Gear Solid* series, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*, had been released to overwhelming critical and popular acclaim in the summer of 2008, two years prior to this episode.

54. This satire of transnational networks of distribution is mirrored in the game-play sequence cited by episode 30. In the original *Half Life*, this sequence requires the player to launch a rocket in order to put a satellite into orbit. Inside the launch control center, a giant rotating hologram of the Earth shows the projected flight path of the satellite, a transparent reference to the invention of the internet by the US military-industrial complex in 1969. Scott alters this context slightly by alluding to the field of biomedical research, which receives significant public funding from the US and other national governments:

Freeman: *while exploring launch control center*: "Oh, I know what this is. Those are electron microscope shots of cells. Yeah, that one's pollen, I think. This must be the Microbiology Department. Why does the military want to kill microbiologists? I've never really known them to be a controversial bunch. I think some people yelled at Pasteur because they didn't understand what vaccines were, but that's all that comes to mind. But why do microbiologists need this very expensive hologram projector? We didn't get one of those. We could've used it more than they could." *Freeman looks at rotating hologram of Earth*.

Freeman: "What's that say? Something about satellites? They don't need this. They're padding their costs to get more grant money."

*Freeman's Mind*, episode 30, 4:36-5:10. January 8, 2011.

55. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 32, 0:14-1:33. May 6, 2011.

56. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 32, 5:25-6:03. May 6, 2011.

57. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 33, 2:42-3:43. May 20, 2011.

58. *Freeman's Mind*, episode 34, 1:29-2:17. May 27, 2011.