THE AESTHETICS OF STEALTH

DIGITAL CULTURE, VIDEO GAMES, AND THE POLITICS OF PERCEPTION

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Hunted

The TV program *Hunted* (Channel 4, 2015-present) turns fugitivity into a spectacular game of hide-and-seek: After a group of contestants are dropped at an unknown location with minimal equipment, they become "the hunted," whose task it is to evade police forces and special intelligence units for several weeks. The prize for those who can manage to become untraceable to "the hunters" is £100,000. Most contestants get caught, but a few usually manage to elude the police. *Hunted* is a strange program, not only because it presents the police as gung-ho participants in the gamification of law enforcement or because it provides identity tourism for predominantly white Western audiences who would like to know what it's like to be on the run. It also places before its contestants a complex challenge. As the contestants try to stay hidden from the hunters, they also have to perform the spectacle of the hunt for the cameras. *Hunted*'s odd twist consists in this double injunction for the contestants: they have to become imperceptible to an environment suffused with surveillance technology and at the same time expose this playful act of hiding to TV cameras. After all, this is reality TV. Moreover, imperceptibility and spectacle are thoroughly articulated insofar as a successful performance of untraceability within *Hunted*'s game of hide-and-seek garners distinction and the audience's recognition. The complexity of this challenge consists in the fact that the form of subjectivity that is most valorized in a program like *Hunted* is one that can modulate its perceptibility at will and accommodate various and even contradictory requirements for perceptibility at the same time. This contrast—the *spectacle* of the *imperceptible*—is what this book calls the *aesthetics of stealth*.

Hunted's preoccupation with being imperceptible is a crucial concern of contemporary digital culture. In this show, digital culture has become synonymous with the widespread, asymmetrical capture and tracking of personal data. Operating from a seemingly impenetrable London skyscraper with a glass facade, the hunters are a team of former police and intelligence officers who rely on surveillance footage, network analysis, and mapping technology to predict the fugitives' next moves. The hunters also encourage people on social media to share hints on the participants' whereabouts. So when the participants of *Hunted* try to disappear into crowds, hitch a ride from strangers, or go off the grid in the woods, these attempts must be understood as tactical moves for resisting capture by a digital network whose sensors reach far into public spaces and the private sphere of UK citizens. And if one's next move can be predicted based on the digital traces that one has left in the past, then an important strategy for preventing capture is to become unpredictable by not behaving like oneself. Seen in this way, *Hunted* can help problematize one of the core tenets of digital culture: subversive authenticity.

In *Discriminating Data*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2021, 139–140) draws parallels between reality TV and the digital culture of Big Data to show that both foster the performance of authenticity by transgression or subversion. The reason for this is that Big Data—the industrial production of enormous data sets and extraction of patterns from those data sets for the profitable purpose of predictive decision-making—needs to *reliably* model the behavior of any given individual. "Authenticity is an ethos used to evaluate social performance—to 'authenticate' and mold 'good' users—especially when they are 'bad.' It prescribes a certain transparency of self that makes someone's data reliable" (Chun 2021, 144). If authenticity is what makes us transparent to an algorithm, then the problem is that people aren't all that "authentic" all the time. Even though much of our daily behavior is habitual, and therefore regular and relatively predictable, we often leave data traces that are ambiguous, contradictory, or filtered by social norms, and therefore less valuable for prediction purposes. To solve this problem, Big Data must coax its users into authentic online behavior, and it does so by feeding controversy. "Controversy," Chun shows, "provides the basis for predictability and works to 'refine' more generically determined factors. Within affectively charged zones, users presumably fall prey to confirmation bias—and thus act in historically consistent ways—because these are zones of belief or authenticity" (2021, 161). Following Chun, social media feed outrage because outraged users are more

likely to express what they truly believe. This allows the capture of more reliable data points, and thus better algorithmic predictions for those users. By then gathering these users in their "affectively charged [digital] 'neighborhoods,'" Big Data fosters "microsegmented conformity" (160, 159).

Chun traces this notion of subversive authenticity to reality TV where hyperbolic performances of transgression and "acting out" register as authentic precisely because they indicate that the person in question dares to be unabashedly themselves (Chun 2021, 149–152; see, e.g., Wood 2017). But what to make, in light of all this, of *Hunted* and the way in which it encourages its participants to not behave like themselves, to evade all attempts at data capture? To an extent, *Hunted*'s fantasies of fugitivity act against the predictive logic of Big Data, which draws on "subversive authenticity" to engineer "microsegmented conformity." Even so, the program holds on to its belief in authenticity. The program does not really ask its participants to "not behave like themselves." Rather, it asks them to not behave like their *habitual*—that is, predictable—selves. Indeed, to escape capture on *Hunted* is to shed all your personal habits and learned norms. One has to behave in a singular manner, every act an emergent singularity that cannot be projected from earlier traces. Here, an individual's authenticity resides in their share of unpredictability, of operational opacity. One might also read *Hunted* in a contrarian sense and suggest that, from the hunters' perspective, the entire program is a means of capturing that very share of singularity. How does a person behave when they are taken out of their usual environment and disconnected from their social network? *Hunted* provides many answers to this question as it depicts how its participants try to escape surveillance under extreme circumstances. While most fugitives get captured, the ones of special interest, of course, are those who do manage to escape. (Hint: Going off the grid seems to be the safest bet.) *Hunted* makes the techniques and tactics of successful fugitives knowable and thus recursively folds them back into the system of data capture. Even the ultimate subversion—of the apparatus of capture itself—can be captured and known until, presumably, all contingency vanishes. *Presumably*.

Making up one's mind about *Hunted* is complicated by the fact that it is a competition, a *game*. As such, the particular outcome of any given round of play—or season—is by definition open (Costikyan 2015). Games, writes Thomas Malaby, are "domain[s] of contrived contingency" (2007, 96). That is, they construct "semibounded . . . arenas for contingency," in which the

players' behavior is constrained by a contrived system of rules, but not predetermined by it (96). Games always, and by necessity, leave a margin for creative behavior, wiggle room for skillful invention. By virtue of being a game, then, *Hunted* must hold open a space for uncertainty and contingency, even if the odds are stacked against the fugitives. In past seasons of *Hunted*, there have been as many as two winning couples who managed to escape their hunters (in seasons 1, 3, and 5). In season 4, by contrast, all the fugitives were caught. One simply cannot know in advance—as reality TV competitions often emphasize—how the cookie crumbles. This unpredictability of the asymmetrical competition is particularly interesting in light of the conflict that *Hunted* stages. As the program pits fugitives against a surveillance apparatus that tries to comprehensively capture and predict their every move, *Hunted* stages a conflict around the very possibility of contingency: Is it even possible in today's digital culture to behave in ways that cannot be predicted by human-machine assemblages? Because *Hunted* is a game, it must at least assume that this question can be answered in the affirmative. More important than the outcome, however, is that the decision between success and failure depends on the contingencies along the way, on the *how* of play, its singular style. The uncertainty of play is not mainly in the outcome; it is "in the path the game follows, in how players manage problems, in the surprises they hold" (Costikyan 2015, 13).

It is also due to this processual indeterminacy that games differ over time and across space (Malaby 2007, 102–105). New singular play styles may require the modification or addition of a game's rules: an example of this is the "introduction of the shot clock in basketball after players such as Bob Cousy developed such incredible ball-handling skills as to be able to 'dribble out' remaining game time when their teams had the lead" (103). Or a game, like mah-jongg, may be played in many slightly different local variations. It is only by virtue of this openness that a game—including its system of rules or algorithm—can relate to its contemporary moment and thus have social importance.

This book argues that stealth is an increasingly important element of contemporary media culture and games in particular—think, for instance, of the social deduction game and pandemic lockdown hit *Among Us* (Innersloth 2018)—because it speaks to a broader social preoccupation of our time that goes beyond games: the desire or need for opacity in a culture of normative transparency. This introduction provides an overview of examples to assess

the scope of stealth's sociocultural relevance and to problematize it. Later chapters look at so-called stealth video games because their gameplay systems and representational logics most clearly articulate the problem at the heart of *The Aesthetics of Stealth*: how to avoid capture in a world that is brimming with sensors. Video games are particularly interesting in this context because they rely on software that simulates algorithm-based fictional worlds. The player who explores these worlds is also the planned contingency that happens to the cybernetic system of the game: video games contrive arenas in which players and software inform one another, where players can attune to the workings of digital technology, where they can learn how algorithms prehend new inputs and react to them. This book is about this *how*, the set of aesthetic and kinesthetic techniques that allow for an element of freedom in the midst of increasingly widespread surveillance facilitated by ubiquitous sensors and predictive algorithms that want "more of the same" (Chun 2021, 163).

In light of all this, *Hunted* looks a bit like a stealth game adapted for reality TV. Remarkably, its premise and rule system acknowledge the double bind at the heart of reality TV's logic of "subversive authenticity," the blurred line between consensual self-exposure and nonconsensual, extractive capture. In other words, the gameplay of *Hunted* encapsulates in a nutshell and negotiates the sociocultural problem of strategic transparency/opacity. To this first insightful observation, we may add a second one that concerns the proposed solution to the stated problem: in *Hunted*, the solution is *stealth*. The way out of the double bind is the tactical management of one's perceptibility in resistance to nonconsensual data capture and algorithmic prediction. But to do this, stealth must predict the predictions. It must move *with* its algorithmic environments and occupy their negative space. In so doing, stealth allows singularities to escape the available categories. Stealth acts as an aesthetic limit to capture. It is orchestrated contingency.

Stealth Parade

Contemporary media culture is awash with fantasies of stealth. There is a wide engagement across various media to create experiences of illicit activities successfully conducted "under the radar." Consider the numerous TV series—among them *Person of Interest*, *The Americans, Turn,* and *True Detective*—that have in recent years presented and affirmed law enforcement agents who willfully, yet illicitly, operate undercover and beyond the rule of

law. Many contemporary artists—including Lee Yong Baek, Liu Bolin, Simon Menner, Desiree Palmen, and Hito Steyerl—have engaged with aesthetic modes of imperceptibility in various ways, often to address the position of the individual in surveillance culture and to explore the potentials of strategic disappearance.[1] In gaming culture, "stealth" is a term that refers both to a play style that favors subterfuge and surreptitious action over open combat and the genre of games in which that play style is dominant. While much more will have to be said about many of the examples mentioned here, this brief overview is offered as a starting point for the arguments presented in this book: in contemporary media culture, *stealth is curiously conspicuous*, especially in media that engage in one way or another—aesthetically, representationally, or otherwise—with contemporary political culture.

In many of these media discourses, concerted imperceptibility by stealth is positively valued and strongly desired. To begin with, stealth provides cover and protection from potential adversaries; in other words, it is valued as relatively safe. Particularly under conditions of state surveillance and corporate data extraction, stealth allows the individual to defend against institutional overreach; it is thus valued as a defense mechanism. Stealth also widens one's margin of maneuver because it allows one to operate beyond the boundaries of the officially sanctioned; this makes stealth potentializing. If, as proverb has it, the heart does not grieve over what the eye does not see, then stealth is valuable precisely because it articulates matters of perception, knowledge, and power in ways that avoid grievance for those who can elude perception. This may include the "grievance" of accountability.

The currency of stealth, however, is not limited to media culture. A series of brief examples from various social domains can indicate the wide penetration of the notion, as well as the principles of stealth into culture at large. First, two very different examples from the domain of gender and sexuality. Toby Beauchamp has recently given a thorough account of transgender individuals' desire to stay under the radar in his book *Going Stealth*. Here, "going stealth" is the expression "used by many transgender-identified people to describe nondisclosure of transgender status":

> The term [stealth] itself invokes a sense of going undercover, of willful secrecy and concealment, perhaps even of conscious deception. The resonance of militarism in this term suggests the extent to which going stealth entails a certain complicity with state agencies, which demand compliance with specific legal and medical procedures and ostensibly offer in return official documentation that helps make stealth status possible. (Beauchamp 2019, 34)

The complexity of the practice is striking: while going stealth is, pragmatically, a matter of protecting one's physical and mental health, as well as social belonging and participation, from various modes of violence and discrimination, it also requires the at least public affirmation of a binary and biunivocal model of sex and gender, where *femaleness* and *feminitiy* (or *maleness* and *masculinity*) mutually confirm one another so that femaleness-feminity and maleness-masculinity can mutually exclude one another. The transgender individual that goes stealth aims to pass as a man or woman within this narrow and constraining model. In the 2020 documentary *Disclosure*, the actress Sandra Caldwell, once a member of the house of LaBeija memorialized in *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston 1991), talks about how she turned away from the ballroom scene because it drew attention to her nonnormative gender:

> I would never think for a moment that I was the only one. And you wanna go, and you wanna say, "Girl, ain't we somethin'?" But, nah, you just left it alone. I wish I could've. Man, wouldn't that have been good. [. . .] What I had learned from the world of the balls, you know, was being grand, and I pushed it all out, living in my new pronoun that I've . . . "stealth." (Feder 2020)

Here, stealth is rhetorically treated as a pronoun—that is, arguably, as a matter of identification. This question regarding the relation between stealth and processes of identification will be occasionally taken up in this book. For now, though, it is important to note that going stealth is a protective strategy for the individual that can help reproduce the systemic heteronormative conditions of marginalization and exclusion against which the individual wishes to protect themself. "Living stealth was the way to survive," the actress Laverne Cox confirms in the same documentary (Feder 2020). Here, as in many other of its occurrences, stealth is duplicitous—but not in the sense of "willful secrecy" or "conscious deception" that these terms can also invoke, as Beauchamp points out. The present account will explore the duplicity of stealth as a pragmatic technique for navigating the various double binds that marginalized individuals face. This relation between stealth and gender is explored further in chapters 9 and 10. Chapter 9 draws on the queer theories of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Kara Keeling, and José Muñoz to show that *magical stealth* can operate as a mode of queering the world with the express goal of undoing the metaphysical precepts that support processes of marginalization and the abjection of some existences.

The second—vicious and vexing—example is the sexual practice called *stealthing*. It should be read as a clear departure and disjunction from the first example of "going stealth"; as an indication of the discursive malleability

and indetermination of the term "stealth," especially in terms of its social and political valuation. The legal scholar Alexandra Brodsky (2017, 183) has established that "stealthing" is a term used by perpetrators to name the practice of "nonconsensual condom removal." In interviews with victims of stealthing, "both men and women describe having sex with male partners with penises who, during sex, removed the condom without their knowledge. Some realized their partner had removed the condom at the moment of repenetration; others did not realize until the partner ejaculated or, in one case, notified them the next morning" (185). From the perspective of the perpetrators, stealth is a tactic for reaffirming "male dominance" and "gender subordination" (204): "Online writers who practice or promote nonconsensual condom removal root their actions in misogyny and investment in male sexual supremacy. While one can imagine a range of motivations for 'stealthers'—increased physical pleasure, a thrill from degradation—online discussions suggest offenders and their defenders justify their actions as a natural male instinct—and natural male right. . . . Men who stealth assault other men display similar rhetoric focused on a man's 'right' to spread his seed—even when reproduction is not an option" (188–189).

Brodsky provides instructive (read: stomach-turning) quotations from online forums in which stealthers defend their practice. More instructive even in the context of this cultural theory of stealth are the very existence and necessity of Brodsky's research: the legal scholar's problem is precisely that the practice of nonconsensual condom removal is very hard to grasp in legal terms. It eludes all the available avenues for legal recourse and their definitions: Brodsky considers criminal law, tort law, [gender] civil rights options, and contract law, but she cannot get a legal hold on the practice. Her starting point and conclusion are that, in 2017 at least, *US law could not apprehend stealthing*. (Since the publication of Brodsky's article in 2017, several countries, as well as the state of California, have introduced legislation that covers stealthing.) It becomes clear that what can and cannot be perceived or apprehended is conditioned by cultural and sociopolitical circumstances, conventions, and biases. More generally, then, it is not surprising that, given the biases in Western societies toward masculinity and whiteness, an inimical and assaultive instantiation of stealth—very different from practices of *passing*—should ally itself to a still-dominant self-conception of the "stealth-universal-white-man," to paraphrase José Muñoz (2009, 94).[2] The relation between stealth and whiteness will be discussed in chapter 10. Through readings of

works by Crystal M. Fleming, Nella Larsen, Charles W. Mills, and Arun Saldanha, chapter 10 shows how the digital mediations of stealth can reproduce whiteness as a social norm, in particular the logic by which whiteness tactically disappears itself. The chapter argues that the more recent games in the *Hitman* series develop a camp aesthetic that allows the franchise to combine what Fleming (2018) calls the "racial stupidity" of its representational world with the "artificial stupidity" of its central game mechanic. This allows the game series to critically reflect on digital whiteness even as it reproduces it.

Of Stealth Viruses and Stealth Voters

Stealth is not only an aesthetic practice. It has also entered political discourse. To grasp the roles that the notion of stealth plays in contemporary political culture, consider the discursive mobilization of the "stealth virus" and "stealth voters" by the administration of President Donald Trump.

Soon after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the novel coronavirus was described as a "stealth virus" because those who carry it are highly contagious before they show any signs of infection. In other words, it is *because* an infected person appears and feels healthy and thus participates in everyday activities that the virus can spread more efficiently. This is indeed a major public health issue: if people are contagious well before they show any symptoms, strategies of contact tracing and containment are bound to play catch-up. But a brief look at medical history can teach us that, in terms of stealthiness, the novel coronavirus pales in comparison to the pathogen that was originally labeled "the Stealth Virus." The expression itself was coined around 1910, decades before this pathogen was identified and named "cytomegalovirus (CMV)," a member of the family of herpesviruses (Griffiths 2012, ch. 1). CMV is a "stealth virus" because infected people do not show any symptoms under normal conditions—ever. Currently, "60 percent of adults in developed countries and 100 percent in developing countries" carry CMV (Griffiths 2012, prologue). Yet, as with other herpesviruses, the carriers rarely if ever experience any signs of illness. Its stealthiness is really what makes this virus so successful: CMV can spread among populations for *decades* without any individual showing any symptoms. The virus's imperceptibility is an effect achieved through the careful evolutionary calibration of the virus to the human immune system. But then, how do we know about it? Well, the main reason why this virus is so well known today is that it is triggered or

forced into action—in spite of itself, so to speak—in carriers with weakened immune systems. For instance, someone who has had an organ transplant will be given immunosuppressive drugs to prevent their body from rejecting the donor organ. But this suppression of the immune system also means that the virus's evolutionary calibration is no longer appropriate. All of a sudden, the virus is too strong for the host's immune system, so it starts to cause disease. In the context of this book, this is interesting because it confirms that stealth has something to do with thresholds of perceptibility. The virus stops being "stealthy" when the threshold for its perceptibility in the host is artificially lowered by immunosuppressants. And it's only then that the CMV's carefully evolved stealthiness is disrupted. *That* is a stealth virus, and it is briefly introduced here to make the following point about the novel coronavirus: calling it a "stealth virus" may be less about articulating its precise pathology and more about making it serviceable to a political discourse that values stealth and opacity in their own right. Indeed, when various political and social actors refer to the coronavirus as a "stealth virus" or "invisible enemy," they pursue a number of discursive effects that weaponize the opacity of the coronavirus for the purposes of controversy.

On March 18, 2020, President Trump made a first effort to politicize the stealthiness of the coronavirus by referring to it as the "invisible enemy." He tweeted: "I want all Americans to understand: we are at war with an invisible enemy, but that enemy is no match for the spirit and resolve of the American people . . ." (Trump 2020). This talking point was subsequently repeated by politicians around the world. In the early days of the pandemic, the notion of the "invisible enemy" helped justify the imposition of the first fifteen-day lockdown in the US and elsewhere. In a speech a day earlier, Trump repeatedly mentioned the "fifteen days" of the lockdown and explicitly connected them to the "invisible enemy" ("Coronavirus Task Force Briefing Transcript" 2020). So because of the then-estimated incubation period of roughly ten to fifteen days, life as we knew it would have to be disrupted for fifteen days so everyone could protect themselves from the virus and stop it in its tracks. Even though that didn't work as planned, the invisibility of the virus is here still discursively linked to its incubation period. It refers to the lack of transparent, reliable knowledge regarding a person's pathological status right after infection.

But by the same token, it also refers to the political opacity of the virus. In the same speech, Trump said: "We have to fight that invisible enemy. I guess

'unknown' but we're getting to know it a lot better." Jack Schafer argued in *Politico* that Trump pursued this rhetorical strategy partly to justify his earlier dismissal and political neglect of this clear and present danger to public health. This rhetoric serves the purpose of deflecting responsibility. The Trump administration's insufficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic can supposedly be explained by the fact that the stealthy virus simply couldn't be detected—that the enemy had the audacity of being invisible on top of everything else. This is, of course, a blatant lie cloaked in an obvious fact—namely, that viruses are invisible to the naked eye, the blatant lie being that, in spite of being somewhat stealthy, the virus had long been detected by the World Health Organization (WHO), which, in turn, had informed governments in a timely manner.

But the notion of the "invisible enemy" is part of political discourse also to explain the lack of long-term strategies and to justify delays in political decision-making. This is partly due to viruses' higher rate of evolution, which means that they can out-evolve human attempts at capturing them. For example, in the fall of 2021, newspapers reported the emergence of a "stealth variant" of the virus's omicron variant. This variant was called "stealthy" because standard polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests could not reliably identify it as the more infectious omicron variant of the coronavirus; or differently put, it could not at first be distinguished from the delta variant. But actually, PCR tests could reliably identify the virus as SARS-CoV-2, just not which variant. That is why some science communicators have called the "stealth" label for this omicron variant a "misnomer" (Le Page 2022). But that makes it all the more urgent to ask what other reasons might motivate the use of the term "stealth." Here, the term "stealth" no longer refers to the incubation period, but rather to the fact that the available testing technology is bound to lag the development of the virus itself. You can learn how to identify something only after it has begun to exist. So the notion of "stealth" here accounts for a more fundamental, processual unknowability of not only the virus, but the future more generally. Certain futures, especially contingencies, cannot be predicted. Here, "stealth" refers to the novel contingency that resists tech-based capture, and thus predictability.[3]

In combination with the talking point of "invisible enemy," this stealth rhetoric associates invisibility or unknowability with hostile behavior. It suggests that the virus's opacity is part and parcel of an offensive act against the American people. On April 5, 2020, Trump tweeted: "We are learning

much about the Invisible Enemy. It is tough and smart, but we are tougher and smarter." Designating the virus as a "smart" "enemy" thoroughly others it as an intentional threat: its intrusion into US territory becomes a willful act of attack rather than a matter of biological reproduction within a highly dense and mobile population of *Homo sapiens*. And, of course, that willful act is also hidden. Here, the invisibility or stealth of the virus acquires the injurious connotation of willful deception that Toby Beauchamp evokes. This also facilitates the war rhetoric that Trump promoted in his approach to the pandemic. This effect is compounded by the repeated association of the virus with China. Trump called SARS-CoV-2 the "Chinese virus" dozens of times, an association that further legitimized the militarization of the discourse around a public health crisis. This discursive triangle between the coronavirus, stealth, and China racialized the pathogen in a way that tapped into old and new discourses of anti-Chinese fearmongering. By casting the coronavirus as an outside threat from China, Trump's rhetoric mobilized American "ideas of vulnerable sovereignty and xenophobia" (Chen 2012, 168).

In this complex entanglement of discursive strategies, the ascription of stealth lends itself to a politics of fear and even *conspiracy thinking* because it suggests that what one believes they see is not all there is to the story. In a culture that treats transparency as normative, discourses of stealth insinuate that a lack of knowledge results from the *deliberate* opposition to transparency. And this insinuation of stealthy behavior also intimates potential alternative explanations for certain events. Chapter 7 looks at the relation between stealth and conspiracy thinking to show that representations of stealth have their own ways of propagating alter-realities within our heavily media-based experience of the world.

Now compare all this to the way in which Fox News evoked the potential importance of "stealth voters" during the 2020 presidential campaign. "Are 'stealth' Trump supporters the president's secret weapon to winning reelection?" the news item suggestively, hopefully, asks ("Are 'Stealth' Trump Supporters the President's Secret Weapon?" 2023). The question arises from Fox News's shallow dive into a communication science paper that studied voters "who secretly voted for someone other than whom they publicly claimed to have voted for" (3). Aptly, the data cited by Fox News is perhaps the least revealing set of numbers provided in this paper: Out of a total of 558 [549] participating "stealth voters," "27 percent [27 percent] secretly voted for Clinton, 54 percent [52 percent] secretly voted for Trump, and 19 percent

[21 percent] secretly voted for someone else" (4; the numbers in brackets are from a confirmatory study, those not in brackets are from the exploratory study; participants could only be part of one study, not both). Fox News picks up on the fact that the majority of those who lie about their vote voted for Trump. What the news item does not—and could not—mention, for lack of data, is how many "stealth voters" there actually are, for instance as a percentage of the total voting population. This might be important to assessing the prowess of this "secret weapon to winning reelection," might it not? Be that as it may, the item spins the overwhelming majority of Trump supporters among 2016 "stealth voters" into a hopeful tale that allows the newsroom to relativize the importance of 2020 election polls that are less hopeful. Incidentally, Fox News already knew this in 2016 when it circulated Kellyanne Conway's analysis, first offered on *Fox & Friends*, that Trump's election was due also to a "small but potent force who kept their vote silent until it really counted," dubbing them "undercover Trump supporters" back then ("Trump Campaign: 'Undercover' Supporters"). "Undercover supporter" in a 2016 postelection analysis; "stealth voter" in the frenzied runup to the 2020 election. The tone is certainly more conspiratorial in 2020, evoking the sense of a secret collective force, a sense of community and belonging. Specifically, the notion of stealth is discursively deployed to widen the perceived boundaries of one's political in-group. Ultimately, though, this rhetoric deployment of stealth supports a divisive politics of polarization between "us" and "them." The coda explores how collective stealth actions can foster a more productive sense of belonging. Through an engagement with the furtive graffiti bombing of the TV series *Homeland*, the coda envisions how artful stealth can foster an insistent sense of belonging *across* political and cultural differences.

Most striking, hopefully, is the contrast between the discourses of "stealth voters" and the "stealth virus." The latter was discursively cloaked in stealth to conjure the image of a reprehensible foreign enemy, whereas the stealth voters are evoked to encourage political sympathizers and inspire trust. The discursive deployment of stealth is not exactly a free-for-all, but in this case, it is certainly a two-for-one. It can be deployed as an accusation against political adversaries and as a reassuring tale to maintain in-group solidarity. Stealth is a nimble middle term that spells both community and conspiracy.

These examples are offered as a first indication of what was earlier called the "currency" of stealth, understood as both the topicality of stealth in

contemporary culture and the pragmatic purchase that a practice of stealth can have in that culture. Overall, this cultural theory of stealth takes media-based articulations of imperceptibility as its starting point and arrives at political questions of conspiracy, queerness, and whiteness in later chapters. This is the general hypothesis that this book explores: the notion of stealth, as articulated in a wide range of contemporary media and beyond, comprises a set of values and techniques that support the politically relevant project of managing and, in particular, reducing the perceptibility of oneself or one's actions. Stealth is a mode of existence that is part of a politics of perception made necessary by a culture of increased technological surveillance. Indeed, chapter 2 proposes that the notion of stealth encompasses crucial aspects of what Colin Milburn calls the "technopolitics" of our digital times (2018, 7). The concept of technopolitics problematizes the ways in which life—including human life in its current geopolitical articulation—is thoroughly entangled with digital technology. The idea that technology and culture *coevolve* in the strong sense of that word is far from new and will be laid out in more detail through an engagement with the work of Gilbert Simondon in chapter 3.

What is new and specific to the history of the present are the singular ways in which technology and life coevolve to produce individual and collective desires for stealth as a sociopolitical tactic across various political spectra. These starting points raise a number of questions: What are the "technopolitical conditions" that make stealth desirable and necessary? When and how do they emerge? In what ways do these conditions constitute problems for life? These questions shall be answered through two brief genealogies of stealth.

2 Digital Prehensions: Two Brief Genealogies of Stealth

Part 1: Digital Imperceptibilities

> Stealth is what we want.
> —*The Americans*, episode "Stealth"

Elizabeth and Philip Jennings are not their real names. Recruited at a young age into the KGB's illegals program, they were groomed to infiltrate US society and then settled in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., in 1965. Having foresworn their existence to the motherland, these two spies perform the liberal American suburbanite couple according to diktat: they produce two children, run a small travel agency as a family business, and maintain friendly ties with their neighbors and community. By night, they chase deserters and counterspies or steal valuable information. *The Americans* (FX, 2013–2018) follows the lives of the Jennings from shortly after President Ronald Reagan's first inauguration until 1987, exploring various aspects of espionage during the Cold War era in a total of six seasons. In the second season, which is of interest here, the Jennings are tasked to obtain information on a Stealth aircraft developed by two competing American companies, Northrop and Lockheed.

One of the achievements of *The Americans* consists in its processual undoing of mutual exclusions. From the very beginning, everything and its opposite are thoroughly embroiled. It begins with the title: Who are "the Americans"? Does the title refer to the unwitting targets of the Jennings subterfuges, or to the moles on US territory themselves? The series is inspired by the 2010 discovery and arrest of eleven Russian sleeper agents. For over a decade, these spies—"directed to gather information on nuclear weapons, American policy toward Iran, [Central Intelligence Agency] leadership,

Congressional politics and many other topics"—had lived "in American cities and suburbs from Seattle to New York, where they seemed to be ordinary couples working ordinary jobs, chatting to the neighbors about schools and apologizing for noisy teenagers" (Shane and Savage 2010). Of course, they were found out. Dig deep enough, and it might just be possible to tell who is friend and who is foe. Yet in everyday life, the difference was for all intents and purposes indiscernible: all-American enemies. What's more, the difference left many indifferent. As former CIA agent-cum-series creator Joe Weisberg states: "People were both shocked and simultaneously shrugged at the [2010] scandal because it didn't seem like we were really enemies with Russia anymore. An obvious way to remedy that for television was to stick it back in the Cold War. At first, the '70s appealed to me just because I loved the hair and the music. But can you think of a better time than the '80s with Ronald Reagan yelling about the evil empire?" (Waxman 2013). Both Russian spy and surburban spouse, simultaneously shocked and shrugging it off: it is this entanglement of apparent contraries in our present political culture that the *The Americans* thinks through. To do that, the series—somewhat counterintuitively perhaps—uses the Cold War era for one principal effect: contrast. To a political culture that can shrug off a shock, the Cold War with its most clear-cut ideological divisions serves as a starting point for thinking through what it means that supposed ideological contraries begin to permeate one another. The Jennings in their suburban idyll are, as they repeatedly insist, at war. Another distinction that *The Americans* thoroughly muddies, then, is between military and civilian zones, between war and peace. "When the civil is no longer clearly demarcated from the military, nor offense from defense, it becomes impossible to say where the exercise of force begins and ends" (Massumi 2015a, 68). And indeed, the most formidable adversary that in turn has already infiltrated the Jennings is what, for purposes of contrast, one might call the American way of life. What was thought to be of the enemy, kept at ideological bay, is already constitutive of oneself. The most starkly contrarious terms are already mutually included in the individual's process of subjectivation. In short, then, *The Americans* projects a political theory for the present into the Cold War era to propose that, even at a moment in history when official doctrine could hardly be stricter about categorical oppositions, these categories are already undone by the complex unfolding of a full-spectrum political process that subsumes everyday life. Or perhaps one could say that, for *The Americans*, our long contemporary moment in political culture begins in the 1980s.

An important moment of mutual inclusion that provides the impetus for this historical aperçu is prepared, as was said, in season 2: one of the Jennings' crucial tasks is to steal information related to the entirely new, highly classified Stealth technology that two private companies, Lockheed and Northrop, are developing in collaboration with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).[1] In addition, the second season of *The Americans* accords a noteworthy role to the video games of the early home console era, as well as the forerunner of the internet, ARPANET. Moreover, the series goes to some aesthetic lengths—to be unpacked and engaged with shortly—to slide the histories of stealth technology and video games into one narrative of the *technopolitics* of our time. Here, some nonfictionalized historical background information may be helpful.

In the 1970s, the US Department of Defense made an important strategic shift. After the bitter lessons of the Vietnam War, as well as the 1973 Arab–Israeli War, "military planners moved to offset the costs associated with heavy losses of both materials and men with technological capability" (Pandya 2010, 139). This was particularly urgent as Americans were troubled by the fact that the Soviet Union was vastly outspending the US on defense, resulting in about "three times as many tanks, artillery [pieces], and armored personnel carriers as [the US] had" (139). In the episode "New Car" (Weisberg and Ackerman 2014), a disgusted Elizabeth Jennings watches a TV broadcast of President Reagan explaining this problem at the 1982 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC): "The Soviet Union outspends us on defense by 50 percent, an amount equal to 15 percent of their gross national product. During the campaign I was asked any number of times: If I was faced with the choice of balancing the budget or restoring our national defenses, what would I do? Every time I said restore our defenses and every time I was applauded. [*The audience applauds*.]" While the necessary funds were made available, it was also clear that "fighting plane for plane . . . had become too expensive" (Pandya 2010, 139). In other words, US defense strategy sought to shift away from a notion of symmetrical arms race and warfare ("plane for plane") and pursued a qualitatively different, asymmetrical approach: the development of aircrafts that could travel without being observed and that could thus avoid force-on-force combat. In this way, the political desire for action below the threshold of the perceptible reoriented technological development toward problems of tech-based imperceptibility.

Significantly, the solution was found by means of digital technology. Previously used mainly in digital avionics systems that substitute for the

mechanical steering of the plane, in the Stealth project digital technology was for the first time mobilized on a large scale to design a plane's exterior. Specifically, digital technology made possible the complex calculations required to determine the surface properties of a plane's exterior that ensure minimal radar signatures so the aircraft would become all but imperceptible to the enemy's radar technology. This focus on technical objects and operations perceiving one another constitutes, as Peter Westwick has established in great detail, a qualitative shift in "design philosophy" away from questions of materials and aerodynamics to new design principles concerned with shape and radar signature (2020, 49; for context, see 48–54). In turn, the new experiments with shape and the resulting complexity of the aircraft's flight behavior also made digital control systems or "fly-by-wire" urgently necessary. This produced a further entanglement between Stealth and video game technology as a "corollary of the rise of fly-by-wire was a dependence on flight simulators" (2020, 86). As Sega's 1970 release of *Jet Rocket* (1970) and Taito's 1975 launch of *Interceptor* show, flight simulators were one of the first military technologies that were adopted in a simplified manner for digital entertainment media and were one way in which this computation-based technics entered the culture at large.

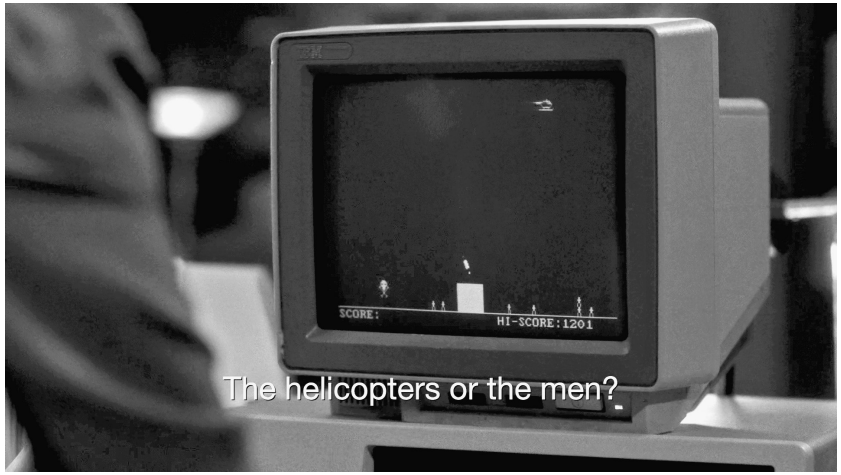
Over the 1970s and 1980s, Lockheed developed several prototypes that resulted in the stealth fighter F-117 Nighthawk, first widely—and successfully—used in the Gulf War of 1991: "Thousands of missions were flown and targets destroyed, without a single plane being shot down" (Pandya 2010, 144). Over the same period, Northrop developed the B-2 "stealth bomber." In service as of 1997, the B-2 was first used in combat in 1999 during the Kosovo War and was still operational at the time of writing. It is worth noting, then, that the technology that the Jennings are trying to steal in 1982 on *The Americans* only begins to transform military operations and will influence geopolitics about a decade later, reaching all the way into the present. And these transformations were remarkable. As the US general Buster Glossen put it: "The single most important accomplishment of the F-117 during the Gulf War, however, was that it saved thousands and thousands of lives. Very close behind is the fact that it revolutionized the way we're going to fight wars in the future, and the way people think about wars" (quoted in Pandya 2010, 144). That said, stealth planes were notorious long before then, especially for being a badly kept secret. US toy stores began to sell model versions of stealth planes in 1986, two years before the airplanes were officially declassified and announced

by government officials (Pandya 2022). Fittingly, Pandya calls stealth planes "the peacocks of the Cold War aviary," confirming once more that stealth is often curiously conspicuous, that imperceptibility is spectacular (2022, 220).

Broadening this assessment, this book contends that the concerns and technology surrounding Stealth can help us understand certain aspects of contemporary political culture, also and especially as articulated by contemporary entertainment media. In this broader context, it is important to note that the preoccupation with digital war technology in *The Americans* cannot be separated from the preoccupation with digital or video games and ARPANET. Instead, the series suggests, these new digital technologies are part of a larger *technical assemblage* that enables a heterogeneous set of technological and social practices. Put differently, a genealogy of contemporary political culture also passes—surely among many other factors missing from the present account—through *a broad "technosocial assembling" around matters of perceptibility* (Lamarre 2018, 7–29; emphasis added). That is a first, general way of stating how Stealth has changed "the way people think about wars." The episode "New Car" provides a crucial sequence for this genealogical entanglement: Henry Jennings, the unwitting son of the spies Elizabeth and Philip, visits his neighborhood friend Doug Tanner, who has an Intellivision home console. Together, they play *Astrosmash*, a 1981 game from Mattel in which the player operates a laser cannon to destroy Earthbound targets from space. When the Tanners go on vacation, Henry, who knows where the Tanners keep their spare key—it's the 1980s—and can't resist the lure of the gaming console abandoned in his friend's home, repeatedly enters the Tanners' house until, on the day the Tanners return from their vacation, he falls asleep in front of the TV set and gets caught. At this exact moment, the sequence cuts to the Russian Rezidentura in Washington, where two Russian spies are busy playing a video game on their work computer, intrigued and overwhelmed by the novelty of the whole thing: "Do I shoot the helicopters or the men?" (Digital interfaces are challenging.) They promptly get caught and interrupted by the Rezident, the head of KGB operatives in the Russian embassy, and are ordered back to work.

How odd: in the middle of the season, the problematics of stealth and counterespionage contract around what the series itself presents as fairly innocuous gaming devices. Moreover, it suggests that the very use of such devices necessitate practices of infiltration and secrecy—namely, Henry's breaking-and-entering-and-playing and the Rezidentura employees' furtive

Figures 2.1 and 2.2
Henry asleep in front of the gaming console, caught by the returning neighbors. Stills from *The Americans*, episode "New Car" (Weisberg and Ackerman 2014).



Figures 2.3 and 2.4
Russian spies having fun with a video game at the Rezidentura. Stills from *The Americans*, episode "New Car" (Weisberg and Ackerman 2014).

enjoyment of their video game. Granted, the games that they play are by no means the kinds of stealth games under scrutiny in later chapters of this book. At best, they prefigure what would later be called the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) or "Star Wars." But the juxtaposition of these two instances of video gaming generates further insightful contrasts understood as instances of "mutual inclusion of what under other circumstances tends to separate out" (Massumi 2015b, 69).

Besides the obvious contrast between the Americans and the Russians, there is the contrast between the Rezidentura office as a professional environment and the living room as a domestic space. The illicit use of digital entertainment technology clearly exists in both settings. Yet, while the Russian spies are interrupted and their gaming activity is promptly dismissed as childish and thus out of place in the workspace, the American living room provides a setting for the confluence of digital technology, entertainment, warfare, and stealth. When Henry stealthily gains access to *Astrosmash*, it's as if he's already performing, perhaps intuitively, the political culture and cultural politics of a new era. This is further compounded by a certain generational contrast: the adult Russian spies, with all their knowledge of power and politics, seem to consider their video game a curious plaything that is easily discarded, whereas Henry, a child of digital culture, knows that the lure of the digital can be answered by means of subterfuge and imperceptibility—at least until one falls asleep in front of the TV, presumably exhausted from gaming. Digital technology is powerful and can get in the way. In any case, the important point, then, is that *The Americans* pulls video game, network, and stealth technologies into the same technocultural complex, and this complex as a whole is characterized by practices of subterfuge and stealth. For *The Americans*, digital technologies and their operational principles in general are necessary conditions that enable the reorientation of technopolitics toward stealth.

Operational Principles of Stealth

In the following chapters, this book explores the technopolitics of stealth from the perspective of contemporary media culture and, in particular, video games. Much will be said that does not apply or only partially applies to the specific Stealth military project. Yet, here at the beginning, it is worth highlighting some of the core operational principles that digital technoculture

enables and that inflect it toward matters of perceptibility. Put differently, what *are* these new and supposedly revolutionary ways in which people think about war and, more broadly, politics and political culture?

In *Respawn: Gamers, Hackers, and Technogenic Life*, Colin Milburn explores modes of life that have emerged with digital technologies. Following and extrapolating from this study of hacking culture, it can be said that two crucial principles of contemporary technopolitics are *occlusion* and *intrusion* (2018, 33–35). Of course, Stealth took occlusion as its very premise: conventional performance measures for aircraft such as speed, altitude, range, maneuverability, and payload—which all have their own strategic advantages—were subordinated to the key measure of observability. Similarly, hacking culture partially defines itself through a strong resistance to practices of surveillance and tracking. Obscurity is not only an important condition of possibility for the success of a hacking attack; it also becomes a mode of cultural expression. Think of the Guy Fawkes mask from *V for Vendetta*, the graphic novel and film, which became the emblem of the Anonymous collective. Hiding, masking, dissimulating—in an era of massive surveillance, these practices are also expressive of cultural concerns more broadly. The sticker that you may have placed across your laptop's built-in webcam can count as a case in point: clearly, contemporary technoculture needs a low-tech, *analog* downshift for people to feel safe—and sometimes a cut-to-size sticky note will do. One might object that the latter is a means of defense rather than offense, but that is secondary for now. More important, the principle of occlusion is worth noting because it undermines values that are central to political theories of Western modernity, most importantly *transparency* and *representation* (in both the political and aesthetic acceptations of those terms). The ramifications are significant. As chapter 6 explores in more detail, sanctioned political process in Western democracies is conventionally grounded in an understanding of citizen as *subjects* who *appear* in the *public sphere* to defend their interests; to this end, political subjects elect *representatives* who act as mediators for their constituents; political *deliberation* is held to be *rational* and *transparent* so representatives can be held *accountable*. Now imagine a political process that tries to circumvent as many of these italicized notions as possible. What would that look like? And sound like? And play like? One of the guiding questions of this study is indeed how digital media contribute to the articulation of a political culture that deviates from conventional and fundamental democratic principles. This media aesthetic of stealth will be

explored in dialogue with critical thinking that already champions occlusion as a strategic and tactical advantage. For example, the following chapters will look to the Tiqqun collective and its proclamation that "to be perceived is to be defeated" (2010, 214). A similar proposal can be found in the Invisible Committee's *To Our Friends*: "Let's disappear," they enjoin (2015, 131).

But stealth is not only about occlusion, in which case it could be mistaken for a secretive defense strategy akin to classifying documents. Stealth implies a mode of secrecy that maintains high levels of actionability. Stealth in this sense is utterly offensive: it enables a continuous secretive forward movement toward the enemy. Or, more to the point, the movement is directed inward as the term "intrusion" suggests. In a nutshell, stealth is about creating and maintaining an unwelcome and efficacious presence in a hostile environment without being perceived. In the case of Stealth aircraft, the goal was for aircraft and missiles to penetrate enemy territory for purposes of reconnaissance and combat. When digital technologies support capitalist models of property, as well as data extraction and management, matters of territory also impose themselves: Who is allowed access to which data and information circuits? Hence the massive investments in network securitization and antimalware software. And, of course, these proprietary enclosures of digital infrastructures generated resistance from hacking communities and their particular ethos. As the hacker St. Jude explains, this ethos is also a matter of intrusion: "Hacking is the clever circumvention of imposed limits, whether imposed by your government, your IP server, your own personality, or the laws of physics" (quoted in Milburn 2018, 27). This statement also indicates another technopolitical condition of the digital era to be explored in more depth—namely, the potentially tremendous asymmetry between adversaries (Brunton and Nissembaum 2015, 48–49). A teenager in his basement can, or could in the recent past, successfully take on (and down) the tech infrastructure of national governments or large corporations. As late as 2010, Sony aggressively pursued and sued the hacker George Hotz (aka geohot) for managing to jailbreak the Playstation 3 and sharing that knowledge (Milburn 2018, 115–118).

Occlusion and intrusion: together, these two create the hair-raising suspicion that the enemy may already be here, among us, *within* us, and we don't even know it. Instead of relying on clearly demarcated territories with their reliable sets of values, we have to consider that we have already been infiltrated. One effect of admitting the mutual inclusions that stealth produces is

paranoia, as when Philip and Elizabeth Jennings begin to mistrust each other because they have been infiltrated by the American way of life. As the discussion of stealth viruses and voters in the introduction showed, this anxiogenic potential of stealth itself can be stealthily employed in political discourse.

Part 2: A Manifold of Prehensions

This is a Google Ngram, which, in this case, indicates how often the word "stealth" has been used in the corpus of English texts searchable on Google Books (see fig. 2.5). There are two graphs: a lower one for "Stealth," with a capital "S," and an upper one for the uncapitalized "stealth." The lower graph for "Stealth" can be considered to roughly refer to the specific DARPA research project presented in the previous section. The upper graph for "stealth" refers to all other uses of the term stealth in the available corpus. It should be said right away that the reliability of the data visualized in Google Ngrams is limited for a number of reasons (Pechenick, Danforth, and Dodds 2015). The argument will curve back to this point. This said, if the graphic is taken at face value for a moment and read accordingly, several things are worth noting. With an eye to the recent past, we can notice that the use of the term has increased since around 1980. But while references to the DARPA

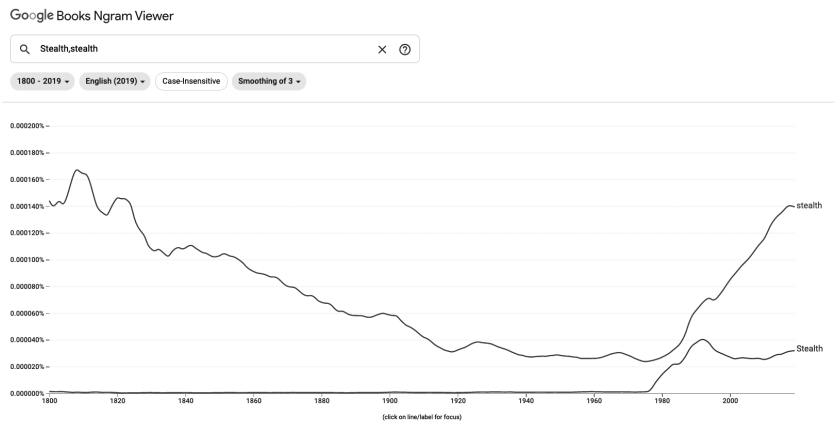


Figure 2.5
Google Ngram Viewer for the terms "stealth" and "Stealth." Note the considerable increase of both terms since the 1980s. The capitalized "Stealth" refers to the specific US defense program focused on Stealth technology. Retrieval date: January 11, 2020.

project "Stealth" start increasing in the 1970s and then decline and plateau from the 1990s onward, the term "stealth" has consistently gained in use.[2] That is, the notion of stealth has detached itself from its genealogical progenitor and taken on a cultural life of its own. How is this to be explained?

The previous sections of this chapter emphasized the role of digital technology in practices of stealth to prepare the following proposition: digital technology perceives us, and its perceptive capacities far exceed those of human beings themselves. This second genealogy will unpack this proposition and suggest that "stealth" is the term used to describe a mode of subjectivation under conditions of digital hyperperceptivity. Note that already stealth needn't be thought as a cultural reaction against or resistance to surveillance technology, as was briefly suggested in chapter 1. If anything, stealth is a technocultural mode of subjectivation *of* digital surveillance technoculture. And its concern is perception. Or, to be more specific: prehension.

The process philosopher Alfred N. Whitehead writes: "Actuality is through and through togetherness" (1967b, 174). Things in the world are nothing without the relations that brought and hold them together. This line of thought is becoming more convincing in recent decades because we are beginning to understand our ecological entanglement with the world. But it is a line of thought that much of modern philosophy struggles with. What Whitehead calls the "materialist view," dominant in modern science and philosophy, insists on strict separations between matter and mind (or soul), giving each the status of a fundamentally distinct substance (17, 55). This amounts to a "bifurcation of nature" into a nature that is pure, uncreative matter and a nature that is perceptive, mental, and creative. In this view, where the world and the mind are a collection of separate and essentially different entities, it is difficult to take full account of the relations between things, such as the relation between human industrial activity and transformations of the climate. For centuries, the materialist view has needed to be shocked out of its arelational quagmire by new observational insights into the fact of relationality. How, then, does one begin to think differently, in a manner that accounts for relationality?

One can start from the idea that what brings things together is process. All actual reality, altogether, issues from the past and feeds forward into the future. This is because, instead of being a mere collection of separate things, the actual world continuously generates itself by virtue of *prehensions*, a "taking account of" certain aspects of the world to form a unity of process

(Whitehead 1967, 42, 69). Following Whitehead, such a prehension must first of all be thought outside the materialist bifurcation of nature. As the philosopher Stamatia Portanova points out, "It is important to note here the nonanthropomorphic nature of prehension as a nonhuman affective response and as the immanent affective ground of all physical and conceptual experiences: the stone prehends the water it falls into. Every step prehends the other, and can never be physically separated from the other" (11). That is, a relational and creative grasping of the world is not the privilege of human intellect or even of animals. Process is a matter of things—say, air molecules, a computer, light, the weather, an idea, a memory, a Whitehead book, these words—registering one another and taking account of one another in the further processual elaboration of their existence. "A prehension is a process of unifying" different aspects of the world into actual fact: "The actual world is a manifold of prehensions" (Whitehead 1967b, 71).

This series of manifold prehensions is produced by "the one underlying activity of realisation individualising itself in an interlocked plurality of modes" (Whitehead 1967b, 70). Such a process, of course, cannot realize every potentiality into actual fact; the work of realization is precisely to unify those aspects of the world that can be organized from within the ongoing "interlocked plurality" of process and fit into the wiggle room for creativity that process holds forth. Following Luciana Parisi, we can speak of a "process of selection [that] is driven by prehensions, which can also be defined as modes of computing data from other actual entities" (Parisi 2013, 62).[3] The crucial point—the very point of substituting the term "prehension" for "perception"—is that a prehension does not accord an ontological primacy to any position within a prehensive constellation, such as to a human perceiver or agent. Here, ontological primacy goes to the encompassing unity of prehension itself. As Whitehead (1967, 72) says: "The [awkward] term [prehension] was introduced to signify the essential unity of an event, namely, the event as one entity, and not as a mere assemblage of parts or of ingredients. It is necessary to understand that space-time is nothing else than a system of pulling together of assemblages into unities. But the word *event* just means one of these spatio-temporal unities. Accordingly, it may be used instead of the term 'prehension' as meaning the thing prehended."

What acts—by virtue of its very own prehensive unity—is the event itself. In light of this, the world appears as a plurality of interlocked processes that inform—or *process*—one another by way of prehensions. This is another way

of stating Portanova's point: "processing" is something that not only technical objects do, but all actual entities in the world. Everything is in process or being processed, including humans: "The human user is no longer the operator of an inflexible machine of calculation, but has become a component or trigger of sequential operations" (Parisi 2013, 28). As machines and humans process each other, their mutual prehension into units of process constitute what Whitehead calls moments of "concrescence" in the literal sense of the word: a growing together.[4] Following Whitehead, then, the term prehension is adopted "to express the *activity* whereby an actual entity *effects* its own *concretion* of other things" (1978, 52; emphasis added).

"Stealth" is the term chosen here for one way in which humans and digital technology have grown together. Thus, such a relational and processual understanding of reality is important to an evaluation of stealth because the notion of stealth implies an increased and intensified awareness of the world's "prehensity," defined here as the ability to prehend and be prehended; that is, to be taken up in moments of concrescence.[5] Digital technology has made us newly aware that human activity registers in the world and feeds into worldly processes, like it or not. Often, one likes it not. And the reason for that is that one does not understand how one's being prehended feeds into further developments of worldly processes. Hence, the desire for stealth. Put differently, one does not understand the new unities of process that have emerged above or below human prehensive abilities. And yet one must live with them. That is, one must process these processes in turn. The central question raised in this book can be formulated in these terms: How do we *culturally* process the new technological processes enabled by digital prehensity? And, as is clear by now, the partial answer provided in this account can be grasped by the term "stealth." Now, to unpack all that.

As shown in the previous section, stealth planes rely on the digital for the sake of generating imperceptibility, in this case the imperceptibility of one technical object, the plane, for another technical object, radar. The digital has the power to prehend and process an entity's power to prehend and process the ambient world. Moreover, the digital has the power to technologically transform the prehensity of certain parts of the world. This introduces a problematic asymmetry into prehensive relations insofar as the stealth plane downright cancels out the purpose of the radar and thus transforms what the enemy comes to perceive as reality. Indeed, following Whitehead,

it can be said that the relation between the stealth plane and the radar is one of *negative prehension*: "An actual entity has a perfectly definite bond with each item in the universe. This determinate bond is its prehension of that item. A negative prehension is the definite exclusion of that item from positive contribution to the subject's own real internal constitution [or concrescence]" (Whitehead 1978, 41).[6] Put differently, to come into itself, every process must also exclude certain aspects of experience from constituting its subjective form. This exclusion is an important productive contribution to the way in which processes play out. The example of the stealth plane makes this clear: the planes' surface is meticulously engineered *for* the radar—it is a bond—so that the plane's presence is excluded from the radar's processing of the world. Similarly, one could say that an animal in mimicry or camouflage has developed a relation to the surrounding world that actively subtracts its presence from contributing to other entities' subjective experience of the world, such as that of a predator. This is the strange relationality of stealth: one actively engages with certain entities in the world to subtract one's existence, or aspects thereof, from that entity's experience of the world. Both examples point to a thorough and intensive relational engagement with the surrounding world. This dynamic of positive and negative prehensions is not only at the heart of the digital's debut in aircraft design; it is also analogous to the cultural politics of perception summarized in the term "stealth": the rapid adoption of digital technology in almost all aspects of human activity requires individual and collective behavior to process digital prehensity in turn—be it through the sticky note on your webcam or the General Data Protection Regulation. A strategic cornerstone in this process is the production of negative prehensions, the active elimination of worldly elements of process from subjective experience. In this genealogical perspective, then, stealth is an effect of technoculture; that is, an effect of technology and culture evolving together, insofar as this coevolution has accentuated the tendency of experience to subtract from existence. (There will be more on coevolution in chapter 3, but first the more concrete part.)

To articulate the prehensive dynamic that both constitutes stealth and creates the cultural desire for stealth through concepts of technoculture and theories of the digital, it can be said that stealth consists in the conjunction of *surveillance capitalism* and *ubiquitous computing*. Simply put, the concept of *surveillance capitalism* implies the overwhelming positive prehensity

of the digital, while *ubiquitous computing* implies that this surveillance is often carried out surreptitiously (in the mode of negative prehension). Following Shoshana Zuboff's account, surveillance capitalism exploits behavioral surplus, that is, it extracts value from the "behavioral by-products" that "trail[] every online action" (2019, 68). Initially, "these behavioral by-products were haphazardly stored and operationally ignored" (67). That is, *before* it was understood as valuable—or as a "difference that makes a difference," to use Gregory Bateson's (2000, 315) definition of a bit of information—behavioral surplus data existed as pure excess, "data exhaust," information that doesn't inform (Zuboff 2019, 67).

Google was leading in the realization that this barrel of exhaust data could be turned into a treasure chest for predictive computing. Surveillance capitalism thus begins with the realization that the excessive prehensity of the digital is not just waste, but has value to the extent that it can inform (i.e., make a difference for) capitalist processes. Excess over what, though? That is the important question for understanding the "asymmetries of power and knowledge" at stake here (Zuboff 2019, 81). Behavioral surplus was in excess of what humans could perceive without technological prehensions and thus also make sense of; thus in excess of what humans deemed worthy of processing for its potential import for human activity. Once discovered, this asymmetry between perceiver and perceived was not treated as a convenient side effect but turned into an integral part of Big Tech's business model (Brunton and Nissenbaum 2015, 48–53). If, according to Google's Amir Patel, the company was to become a "broad sensor of human behavior," then this sensor itself had to be imperceptible. In Zuboff's words:

> Google's inventions destroyed the reciprocities of its original social contract with users. . . . In the new operation, users were no longer ends in themselves but rather became the means to others' ends. . . . The last thing that Google wanted was to reveal the secrets of how it had rewritten its own rules and, in the process, enslaved itself to the extraction imperative. Behavioral surplus was necessary for revenue, and secrecy would be necessary for the sustained accumulation of behavioral surplus. . . . Hiding was not a post hoc strategy; it was baked into the cake that would become surveillance capitalism. (2019, 88–89)

As companies like Google feast on behavioral excess data, they have an interest in preserving the impression that their treasure trove is really just a fog of "data exhaust" for those from whom it is extracted. The broad sensor must prehend positively and be prehended negatively, let alone comprehended.

Ubiquitous computing is a euphemism for this obfuscation of the digital's processing of human activity. The term might initially be taken in the opposite sense since "ubiquity" suggests ever-presentness, and presentness might be mistaken for presentation. But, as Luciana Parisi points out, "the arrival of ubiquitous computing" must be understood as "the withdrawal of mediatic action to the background of perception and direct experience" (2013, 27). Yet human activity is therefore no less entangled with digital processes of algorithmic computation. "According to Weiser, ubiquitous computing changes not only the locations of digital machines but also the use of such machines. The human user no longer activates computation, but is now incorporated in the programming system, as she or he can now indirectly profit from the computational capacities hidden in mundane objects. . . . This stealthy intrusion of algorithmic programmability into distinct ordinary objects" allows for the backgrounding not only of how and what the broad sensor prehends but also when and where, for instance in a smart home (28).

Even lightbulbs are in touch with Google these days. Thus, one *might* say pessimistically, we are a bit like radar to a stealth plane: oblivious to intrusions into and prehensions of our existence by the digital. Except, of course, that we know all of this, at least generally. And that is crucial. One important note to make regarding negative prehensions is that they *are* integrated into experience: "The negative prehension of an entity is a positive fact with its emotional subjective form" (Whitehead 1978, 41–42, see also 219; see Parisi 2013, 185–193). That is, our experience of the world is also an experience of active exclusion and that which has been actively excluded. For example, toxic environments, though they rarely betray their toxicity on the surface, can be so heavy because they are thick with experiences of what is continuously disallowed to exist in them. So, even though the "ubiquitous apparatus operates through coercion and stealth," and even though we may not know exactly what information digital technology perceives and processes, we very much experience *that* there is an asymmetry in prehensity, which in turn is imbricated with circuits of economic and political power (Zuboff 2019, 253). While these transversal relations between technology, economy, and politics are not themselves the focus of subsequent chapters, it is important to state here that digital technology has allowed for an intensified political and economic investments in matters of perception. The general knowledge of and disappointment in these vested interests make the hyperprehensity of the digital world seem suspect.

For example, discourses of the so-called *smart city* heavily rely on infrastructures of ubiquitous computing that strategically distribute positive and negative prehensions. As Adam Greenfield points out, "the average pedestrian" in a smart city "is at best only liminally aware of the presence or the operation of these sensors" of the smart city (2017, 36–37): "With the exception of [closed-circuit TV] cameras—most of which are very much meant to be seen—these devices are not of any particularly obvious telltale shape. Some are literally embedded in the walls; others are sealed away beneath the street surface, with nothing more than the occasional shiny seam in the paving or the Day-Glo annotations of utility personnel to betray their presence." Thus, smart city networks are reliant upon the creation of negative prehensions for their basic functioning and thus risk evolving into what Julian Oliver in a related context calls "stealth infrastructure" (2014). (There will be more on smart city discourses in chapter 4.)

The Ngram from the beginning of this chapter can count as another example. It is extremely prehensive, in that it grasps the minutest of changes in frequency. The noncapitalized "stealth" made up 0,0000269567 percent of Google's English-language corpus for 1980 and rose to 0,0001403942 percent in 2017. Granted, that is more than a fivefold increase. But how reliable is this historical graph if we consider that the visualization tool indiscriminately grasps information from an immense hodgepodge of heterogeneous sources—for instance, fiction and research literature—whose distribution within the overall corpus also changes considerably over time (Pechenick et al. 2015)? So how does this information inform? What did statistical computation have to actively exclude to produce the entity of the Ngraph that we are meant to consider valuable information? It's hard to tell, by design.

The overall result of these developments is a general distrust of prehension itself. Thus, the situation becomes culturally problematic, for both individuals and societies, in a way that cannot at present be resolved, as ongoing tensions around privacy regulations and data extraction demonstrate. So what does one do? One begins to manage how one is prehended, selectively withdrawing and exposing oneself in an attempt to prevent unwelcome intrusions.

The unresolved problem of prehensity that digital technoculture poses comes to cultural expression in what is called here the *aesthetic of stealth*. In a world of information asymmetry, stealth as a means of obfuscating one's individual data traces can be, to follow Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum, a weapon of the weak (2015, 56–58). As the following chapters of this book will

show, *stealth* as a concept and practice articulates a process of subjectivation that aims at the selective making and unmaking of one's own information signature. But, importantly, stealth is not simply a reactive resistance to surveillance. It is, to rejoin the stealth parade from the introduction, showcased and celebrated in technoculture itself. The brief example of *Hunted* from chapter 1 illustrated that aesthetic expressions of stealth come to directly value this mode of subjectivation as an *affordance* of digital technoculture. The example of stealthing or nonconsensual condom removal evidences the offensive and aggressive power fantasies that are also articulated through to the notion of stealth. That is to say, even though the currency of stealth issues from planes and digital technology, it has maintained itself by propagating and taking on wider cultural importance. Stealth is, as was suggested earlier, an *effect* of technology and culture coevolving. It is an aspect of technoculture's ambiance.

3 Stealth: A Coevolution of Technology and Culture

Human and technological prehensity could be deemed "incompatible" or "incommensurable" based on the argument presented in chapter 2. But they are better thought of as belonging to different *modes of existence*, or general ways of being in the world. The French philosopher Gilbert Simondon distinguishes between different and disparate modes of existence with their autonomous processes of individuation: physical, living, psychic, technical. Each mode comes with its own immanent processual parameters that distinguish how an individual—a crystal, a worm, a human, a machine—comes into existence and continues to individuate (Simondon 2017, 2020). For example, an important processual parameter for the individuation of the living is the maintenance of metabolic homeostasis. According to Simondon, this is not a processual parameter for psychic individuation, although psychic individuation depends on the living being that supports it, of course. Indeed, aside from describing the different forms of individuation, an achievement of Simondon's philosophy is his description of how these modes of existence relate to each other. That is also the topic of this chapter. Stealth, understood as the cultural desire for and practices of imperceptibility, arises from the differential between psychic and technical modes of existence as they act on each other. This chapter addresses the question of how this relation is to be thought more generally as a motor of cultural developments. Furthermore, it strives to articulate this relation for the particular case of video games, which constitute one important technology through which this book thinks the aesthetics of stealth. Since the remainder of this book will concentrate on the cultural—and thus transindividually psychic—development of stealth, the overall focus here shall be on technical individuation. But for the purposes of contrast, a short sketch of psychic individuation is in order.

From the processual and evolutionary viewpoint that Simondon takes, psychic individuation is an achievement of living individuation that allows life to individuate in more complex and creative ways. Instead of following the parameters of living individuation, psychic individuation invents cognitive schemata and higher-order processes that ultimately allow it to conceive and actualize alternative ways of relating to the world, for instance through technology.[1] "Foresight," "creative imagination," and conceptual "thought" are some of the important aspects of psychic individuation that allow humans to prehend a larger scope of abstract potentials for how the world can grow together (Simondon 2017, 60). To put it in the terms introduced in chapter 2, one achievement of psychic individuation is that it introduces higher degrees of abstraction into the world's process of concrescence and thereby potentializes them.

The mode of existence of a technical object is quite different. Simondon's starting point is the observation that "the operation of a machine harbors a certain margin of indeterminacy," which "allows the machine to be sensitive to outside information"; "it is this sensitivity"—or *prehensity*—"to information on the part of machines that makes a technical ensemble possible" (2017, 17). This openness is the key to coindividuation because it "presuppose[s]" the human as the "permanent organizer, as the living interpreter of all machines" in relation to one another (17). Technological and psychic individuation require one another for the continuous determination of their processes of existence. In this sense, "the human is *among* the machines that operate with the human" (18; emphasis in original, translation modified). Thus, humans and technology are mutually included in one another in that they require each other for processing each other's processing of the surrounding world. They mutually codetermine their various potentials into actual, albeit provisional realities. This determination advances the process of *technical* individuation if it leads to the increased functional consistency of the technology itself or what Simondon calls its "concretization" (20, 36 passim). Analogous to Whitehead's concept of concrescence, "concretization" refers to the growing-together of articulated, yet discontinuous parts that "tends toward a state which would turn the technical being into a system that is entirely coherent within itself and entirely unified" (29). But, importantly, "the technical object is never fully known; for this very reason, it is never completely concrete" (39).

All of this leads to the central concept of *technicity*: As a technology's margin of indeterminacy decreases and its internal functionings concretize, that technology specifies the manner or *mode* in which it allows a processing of the world. This is what Simondon calls "technicity": the internal "functional schemas" or "stable behaviors" that a concretizing, functionally integrated technology acquires (74). "Technicities are powers [*puissances*], in the fullest sense of the term, which is to say capacities for producing or undergoing an effect in a determinate manner" (74). By extension, technicity also betokens the various potential qualities of or affordances for engagement that a technology holds forth.[2] This is important because it means that it is through technicity that technology and culture creatively and inventively interact. Technicity refers to a technology's particular "mode of relation between human and world" (Combes 2013, 60). Thus, it is also in the domain of technicity that technologies bend to the forces of other modes of existence, including social, political, and economic modes of organization.

Technical *invention* happens as the "internal distribution of functions" within a technical system is modified, rearranged, and integrated in such a way that previous limitations internal to the system's functioning itself can be overcome (32). The technical object makes an evolutionary "leap" over itself to acquire a new functional consistency. This is a moment of invention—not of discovery (e.g., of behavioral surplus)—because technology is informed by its own potential in "a conditioning of the present by the future," effectuated by the "schemes of the creative imagination" (60). Thus, humans and technology are capable of taking up the functional schemes of each other, but this should not be thought as a mere application of established principles. Because the technical and the human belong to different modes of existence, they cannot but *transduce* into other domains of existence, where transduction is "the transmission of a force of potential," "the transmission of an impulse of virtuality from one actualization to another and across them all (what [Félix] Guattari calls transversality)" (Massumi 2002, 42–43). Transduction is the mutual potentialization of different domains of existence with the strange effect that what was a mere virtuality, a vague futurity, in one domain is informed by the virtuality of another domain in such a way that it becomes an *actualizable* possibility. How such transmissions of virtual impulses play out is not a matter of intentional human agency, but of different processes of individuation informing one another. Thus, following

Simondon, technology's process toward increased concretization and specified technicity proceeds according to its particular mode of existence, which is however open to human creativity as an important, nonoptional factor in this process.

The previous chapter's argument regarding the prehensity of the digital can be specified by way of this theorization. Digital technology's excessive prehensity and what was initially considered its propensity for "data exhaust" are—as was parenthetically remarked—a more concrete formulation of the digital's openness to outside information, an aspect of its technicity awaiting determination by its coevolver. How did this mutual determination for the purpose of concretization come to pass? The following passage from Shoshana Zuboff's account can serve as an anecdotal illustration of the complex existential moves between technology and culture. Zuboff relates how the employees at Google discovered the full potential of behavioral surplus, which then made way for the technical inventions of surveillance capitalism. Interestingly, at least for a media scholar, this anecdote involves broadcast TV:

> The firm's appreciation of behavioral surplus crossed another threshold that April [2002], when the data logs team arrived at their offices one morning to find that a peculiar phrase had surged to the top of the search queries: "Carol Brady's maiden name." Why the sudden interest in a 1970s television character? It was data scientist and logs team member Amit Patel who recounted the event to the *New York Times*, noting, "You can't interpret it unless you know what else is going on in the world."
>
> The team went to work to solve the puzzle. First, they discerned that the pattern of queries had produced five separate spikes, each beginning at forty-eight minutes after the hour. Then they learned that the query pattern occurred during the airing of the popular TV show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The spikes reflected the successive time zones during which the show aired, ending in Hawaii. In each time zone, the show's host posed the question of Carol Brady's maiden name, and in each zone the queries immediately flooded into Google's servers.
>
> As the *New York Times* reported, "The precision of the Carol Brady data was eye-opening for some." Even Brin was stunned by the clarity of Search's predictive power, revealing events and trends before they "hit the radar" of traditional media. As he told the *Times*, "It was like trying an electron microscope for the first time. It was like a moment-by-moment barometer." (Zuboff 2019, 75)

What a manifold of prehensions and transductions! Machines prehend human behavioral surplus—in the form of apparent data waste like Carol Brady's maiden name—which needs to be prehended and coordinated—by way of human cognition—with a related series of events or prehensions—the

regularity of broadcast schedules—in order for humans to conceive a potential functional scheme of digital technology. The mere potential of data excess transduces into a clear conceptual idea: data exhaust holds the power [*puissance*] to predict individual and group behavior, and this allows it to be coupled with the future-tending operations of capital. The pennies drop. In this way, as yet unrealized functional schemes of technology are transmitted and integrated in a moment of psychic individuation. This conceptual idea now needs to be transduced back into viable functional schemes of digital technology. As chapter 2 suggested, the subsequent codevelopment of technical and psychic (cultural) individuation largely followed political desires of control through surveillance and economic desires of capitalist value extraction. And thus the digital's dual potential to prehend the world while remaining operationally opaque have concretized into a core aspect of its technicity. The term "stealth" can be taken as a way of grasping this technicity in one word.

Yet these developments were preceded and prepared by the much earlier invention of stealth planes. According to Simondon, technical lineages have an "absolute origin" consisting in the "synthetic act of invention constitutive of a *technical essence*" or "pure schema of functioning that is transposable to other structures" (2017, 46, 45; emphasis in original). The present account situates the technical origin of stealth in the military research project Stealth because it is here that the digital as an element in the technical ensemble of the plane concretizes an entirely new functional mode of the plane as a whole and becomes synergistic as it transduces the human desire for imperceptibility. Converging with a much longer history that connects matters of warfare and perception, traced for instance in Paul Virilio's *Cinema and War*, the digital here actualizes its potential for the creation of reality as prehended.[3] As this tremendous ability to shape what will register as actionable reality is functionally integrated, technology becomes newly powerful or potentialized. In chapter 10, this mode of power will be specified as *ontopower* (Massumi 2015a). Following Simondon, it can be said that the broader economic and political exploitation of digital prehensity at a later stage constitutes a series of inventions that refine the new potentials released by this initiating moment. That is not to say that these refining inventions are less worthy of interest. Quite the contrary: these refinements and their cultural impact are the topic of this book. But it is worth noting that an evolutionary deployment of the technical usually requires a certain freedom from economic imperatives. As Simondon

puts it, "It is mostly the domains where technical constraints prevail over economic constraints (aviation, military equipment) that become the most active sites for progress" (Simondon 2017, 31; translation modified). This explains why many now common technical objects—from duct tape over EpiPens and microwaves to the global positioning system (GPS)—were invented by and for military use: money was decidedly not an issue. It is the relative freedom from economic pressure that allowed aircraft technology and the digital's prehensive potential to grow together and create Stealth.

In light of this genealogy, the supposedly "revolutionary" impact of stealth planes hyperbolically hailed by General Buster Glossen (quoted in Pandya 2010, ch. 2) can now be thought as merely an evolutionary leap. But Paul Virilio himself was partial to such hyperbole when, in *Desert Screen*, he qualifies Stealth as a "technological revolution" (2002, 110). Discussing the deployment of Lockheed's F-117 during the first Gulf War, Virilio confirms that Stealth produces the subordination of aircraft's aerodynamics to what he calls "icodynamics," the power to create semblances or likenesses:[4]

> *The image in real time* of the supersonic aircraft prevails from a distance over the form of least aerodynamic resistance; in other words, over the real space of the design of its cockpit and airfoil. . . . It is almost as if the image in the mirror were suddenly modifying our face: the electronic representation on the screen, the radar console, modifies the aerodynamic silhouette of the weapon, the virtual image dominating in fact "the thing" of which it was, until now, only the "image." . . . Therefore, the immediate and remote presentations of the flying object tend to be indissolubly confused. (Virilio 2002, 111; emphasis in original)

"As if the image in the mirror were suddenly modifying our face": what Virilio describes here is once again the processual aspect of digital prehensity (albeit in terms reminiscent of discourses of simulacra that were widespread in the early 1990s). Similarly, Harun Farocki in his own engagement with the Gulf War, most notably in the installation *Eye/Machine*, established the term "operative image" to refer to the fact that such images intervene in and transform reality rather than just representing an object (see Farocki 2004 and Hoel 2018).[5] Indeed, the present account relies on Whitehead's theory of prehension in part because, unlike many other theories of perception and images, it thoroughly subordinates questions of representation to matters of process and processing. (Hence also the resistance to *simulacra*.) The technological processing of reality in real time results not merely in an accelerated exchange of information between human and technology; it folds (rather than "confuses") human and technological prehensity into one another in a

way that transforms what comes to count as reality. It both *opens* human perception to the prehensive scale, speed, and processing power of the nonhuman and *requires* it to operate with them (if not exactly *at* them, given their different modes of existence). This challenge leads to the increased "significance of the *screen of control*" as an interface that articulates human and technological prehensity and which takes on the "eminently strategic function of the *central control of information*" (Virilio 2002, 111; emphases in original).

The question regarding coevolution raised in this chapter concerns precisely this strategic control of information that is at the heart not only of Stealth, the military research project, but also stealth as a technocultural practice. If, as Virilio states, "the technologies which compose and organize [Stealth] are those that tomorrow will structure the city" and civic life more generally (2002, 114), then how has the technological phylum that begins with a military research project concretized or grown into our technocultural lives more generally? How has the human as the "permanent organizer, as the living interpreter of all machines" strategically interpreted their activity as their tremendous prehensity become both affordance and danger (Simondon 2017, 17)? How do we who cannot help but be "*among* the machines," which cannot help but prehend us, "operate with" them (18; emphasis in original)? The following chapters of this book attempt to provide answers to these questions, with a particular focus on media culture and how it articulates spectacles of strategic imperceptibility, or what has been called the *aesthetics of stealth* since chapter 1. What remains to be done in this first part of this book is to explain this particular focus. Along the way, the argument will also lay out how the present account conceives the *cultivation* of stealth through digital art and video games more specifically.

When chapter 2 introduced stealth planes via *The Americans*, a TV series from the 2010s, it was to suggest that we are indeed still individuating with or along this lineage in technical evolution. It was also to highlight how the series brought cutting-edge developments in war technology into aesthetic proximity with digital entertainment technology: As Elizabeth and Philip chase the science and engineering behind Stealth, their son Henry sneaks through the neighborhood to play *Astrosmash*, and even Russian spies are distracted by the spectacle of video games. These are all examples of human-technology coindividuation that involve a control screen or interface and that articulate complex matters of technical and ultimately social imperceptibility. Digital interfaces, then, are the sites not only of information exchange and the seamless interaction between machines and humans. They moreover

articulate the operational differentials between technical and psychic individuation that can transduce into new strategies of engagement that propagate and settle into cultural practice. So while this book occasionally returns to such notions of *stealthing* and *going stealth*, first presented in chapter 1, the remainder of this book will take digital media art as a starting point because it is here that the *cultural* effects of the disparity between human and digital technology can be experienced more directly. It is here that the preoccupation with digital prehensity is transduced and expressed through the strange and instructive duplicity of an *aesthetics* of *stealth*, that imperceptibility becomes conspicuous and spectacular. While the following chapters consider examples from TV and video art, video games are particularly conducive to such an investigation because their interfaces articulate aesthetic experiences that require and allow for the counterenactment of digital procedures in real time. As Alexander Galloway (2006) puts it: "To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to *interpret* a game means to interpret its algorithm. I suggest that video games are, at their structural core, in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatic age" (90–91; emphasis in original). Note that this is different from saying that players themselves are in direct synchronization with the political realities of the information age. On the contrary, playing video games often involves cheating code and strategically circumventing or creatively exceeding the human behavior intended (but not determined) by a game's algorithms (Consalvo 2007). In other words (namely, Simondon's), video games provide an arena of play in which the technicity and margin of indeterminacy within the operations of digital machines can be creatively and playfully tested through a variety of behaviors.

The aspect of *play* is crucial for what was just called the "cultivation" of stealth. Play is a (human) animal activity in which the requirements of functional, use-oriented behavior are temporarily suspended. This enables the existential experimentation through gestures that are analog to functional behavior, but through that very analogy introduce a difference, an "excess over function" (Massumi 2015c, 11):

> The gap between the ludic gesture and its analogue creates a margin of maneuver: it opens the door to *improvisation*. Play is the arena of activity dedicated to the improvisation of gestural forms, a veritable laboratory of forms of live action. What is played at is invention. The aesthetic yield of the play comes with an active mobilization of improvisational powers of variation. (Massumi 2015c, 12; emphasis in original).

In structured play activities, including video games, this freedom to experiment and improvise is of course considerably constrained by the game's logical and computational rules. But these constraints must be thought as affordances enabling the inventive engagement with algorithmic operations or, in short, as the digital game's technicity. However strict their rule systems may be, games *must create* uncertainty—and not only regarding outcomes, as the game designer Greg Costikyan insists: "The uncertainty is in the path the game follows, in how players manage problems, in the surprises they hold" (2015, 13).[6] For the particular case of video games, this means that the algorithmic rules framing the play activity must hold open a "creative plasticity, an improvisational margin of maneuver" that allows for a variety of creative rejoinders that can in turn be processed by the game software (Massumi 2015c, 13). Differently put, then, the schematic or patterned uncertainty that imbues the activity of video gaming is a constructed analog of the game engine's own margin of indeterminacy, its functional openness. Thus, Galloway's general proposition that gamers "know" algorithmic systems is here understood to mean that they creatively explore digital games' technicity and operational margin of indeterminacy. For the study of stealth video games specifically, it is furthermore important that a game's schematic rule system—already an analog of digital algorithms—is in turn "skinned" in the representational analogs of secret agents, black sites, and infiltration missions. Viewed in this way, video games are complex digital analogs. The following chapters explore how video games and other artworks of the digital era articulate these analogies and how they engage with the improvisational margin of maneuver opened up through artistic articulations of digital prehensity. In any case, this study contends that a strand of video games (and other digital art) composes conjunctions of algorithmic operations, playfully creative behavior, and representations of stealth, and that this conjunction makes these media promising sites for the development and study of a digital *ethico-aesthetic* of the present. That is, video games constitute an *aesthetic* form that actively fosters in players the cultivation of their own *ethos* or behavioral habits when engaging with digital technology.

Following Massumi, play is a form of "lived abstraction" (2015c, 9). The excess over function is an expression of "a surplus-value of animation, vivacity—*a surplus value of life*" (10; emphasis in original). This means first of all that play is one of psychic individuation's ways to explore and actualize potentials, to grow the abstract into our lived experience and let it act in the world. Indeed, this can be considered an important processual aspect of art in

general.[7] This, in turn, means that digital play as a form of lived abstraction runs alongside and potentially counter to the concretizing thrust of technical evolution. As digital play actualizes new potentials through improvisation and experimentation, it creatively *modulates* the operations of algorithmic procedures rather than just "modeling"[8] itself on them (4 and 23–24). Thus, play creates a "circuit of reciprocal potentialization" between the play activity and its operational analog (24). This is important because of what happens in the course of this processual circuit: The player develops new *qualities of doing*, new ways of operating that introduce a minimal but momentous difference into human-technology relations. Another word for these qualities is *style*, understood as the inventive singularity of ludic gestures. Style is the aesthetic signature of the player's creative liveliness in doing what can of course be done differently as well (Massumi 2015c, 5, 9, 13). But it is this qualitative singularity of style that produces the "aesthetic yield" of play that makes a difference in how processes play out, that creatively inflects how things concretize.

On the one hand, then, stealth appears as a style invented in and with playful art. In what follows, this will show most clearly in the chapters that look at stealth as a specific "gameplay style." For now, let's note that *stealth as style* pries open the concretizing force of the digital to flush it with abstraction, to invent tactical rejoinders to the existential threat of the world's increased prehensity. Put differently, the digital's extraction of behavioral surplus is countered by playful abstraction as a surplus value of life. On the other hand, though, for Simondon, such inventiveness "presupposes in the inventor the intuitive knowledge of . . . technicity" (2017, 74). Thus, to reformulate a throughline of this introductory part, stealth as stylistic invention goes hand in digit with stealth as the abstract functional schema of digital technology. Ultimately, then, stealth is the name given here to the creative push and pull between style and technicity.

Now, what characterizes this style? Chapter 4, which immediately follows, proposes that the general disposition of stealth aesthetics can in many ways be qualified as baroque, for instance because it proliferates "microperceptions" as a technique for inflecting how the world comes to be experienced (Deleuze 2006, 98). Stealth is the style of negotiating the relation-of-nonrelation between human and technological prehensity by creatively and tactically enfolding microperceptions to unfold a precarious, yet resilient subjectivity of digital technoculture.

4 Technostealth: A Baroque Disposition

The aesthetics of stealth allow many different stylistic variations, as later chapters will show. This chapter, however, aims at elucidating the more general aesthetic disposition of stealth by suggesting that stealth follows the aesthetic principles of the neobaroque. In particular, this chapter wants to highlight two points. The first is that the aesthetics of stealth across various media rely on the construction of a multiperspectivalism within a network of interlocking prehensions. As a result, the focus of aesthetic operations shifts to the threshold of perception: an intervention is efficient if it succeeds in acting just under the threshold at which an entity can be positively prehended from other attending points of view. Second, the processual yield of this aesthetic inclination is a mannerism that foregrounds minimal interventions and minor gestures as capacious modes of world-making. Two media examples will serve as case studies to demonstrate these aesthetic tendencies of stealth: after returning to *The Americans* once more, the chapter will look at the video game *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft Toronto 2020) to formulate the mannerist style of stealth gameplay.

The particularly baroque qualities of digital technology have been well established, for example in the work of Angela Ndalianis and Timothy Murray. In *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Ndalianis shows that the entertainment industry's shift toward expanded seriality through, for instance, transmedia franchises and their extensive world-building projects relies on the affordances of digital production, distribution, and reception (2004, 4). Such franchises of networked narratives foreground what Ndalianis calls "polycentric" approaches to world-building, an approach that attempts to compose an experience of worlding by proliferating narratives that provide new partial and intersecting perspectives on the shared fictional

world (2004, 25–27). In this sense, contemporary media culture shares with the Baroque a fascination with whole-part relations and an appreciation for the ways in which the relations between parts associate them into complex systems. As a result, increasingly extensive storyworlds are experienced as narrative "labyrinths," an architectural form that the Baroque appreciated both for its compositional complexity and its ability to overwhelm human sense-making. Not incidentally for a consideration of video games, labyrinths are also playful spaces that visitors can learn to navigate. Often in the digital Baroque, the "audience is placed within a confusing labyrinth and then invited to discover order" (76–77). Thus, the mazelike constellations of digital media culture foster the baroque desire for encyclopedic mapping of real or fictional worlds, or what Murray refers as the "baroque trope of the informational interconnectivity of networks, libraries, and archives" (2008, 19). While the seventeenth century found its exemplary expression of the desire for a comprehensive collection of available knowledge in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, today this desire manifests in collaborative projects such as Wikipedia and the numerous online wikis that collect and order the knowledge about fictional worlds such as the *Star Wars* or Marvel universes. In turn, this striving for perfect knowledge and reproduction of the world is closely related to the baroque desire for virtuoso artistry and technical perfection through repetition, which find their contemporary expression in digital practices of data mining, but also the aesthetic excess of illusionistic computer-generated images (Ndalianis 2004, 81–107; Murray 2008, 1–14).[1] So there's something peculiarly baroque about the digital and digital culture.[2] Given that stealth is conceptualized here as a tactical engagement with the prehensive aspect of said digital culture, this chapter relies on theories of the (digital) Baroque to clarify the aesthetic principles of stealth.

Like our contemporary era, the seventeenth century was characterized by tremendous advances in the technical prehensity. Microscopes and telescopes in particular allowed for the visual prehension of things minutely small and unimaginably distant. Differential and integral calculus as developed by Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz gave the mind a mathematical grasp of the complex rates of change and curved shapes observable in the world. Certain aspects of the world could now be perceived, described, and understood at new scales and in terms of process. These technical and scientific developments would later pave the way for the formulation of a so-called modern humanist worldview that gives the human primacy and supremacy

over the world. But the inauguration of humanist Enlightenment, which celebrates *Homo faber*'s power over a world of material objects, also required the marginalization and depreciation of a philosophical current that emerged in the seventeenth century itself: the Baroque.[3]

This turn toward the historical period of the Baroque may seem like an odd kink in the story that this book tries to tell. Yet the Baroque and its fascination with the processual and relational exuberance of the world provide important precursors to contemporary process philosophies and digital aesthetics. In his book *The Fold*, Gilles Deleuze not only offers a thorough engagement with Leibniz as "the Baroque philosopher par excellence" (2006, 37) but also provides his sole explicit engagement with Whitehead. One relation between these two philosophers consists in the crucial question that resounds through both philosophies: "What is an event?" (86). Like Whitehead, Leibniz, and with him the Baroque, are interested in how an occurrence comes to happen. Both think of the world as a series of interlocking perspectives or points of view—located in monads for Leibniz and events or prehensions for Whitehead—from which certain aspects of the surrounding world are illuminated or gain importance (Deleuze 2006, 26, 88). If the conditions are favorable, the surrounding worldly processes are inflected from the capacitated perspectives, which thus act as processual nodes. By implicating Deleuze's perspective on Leibniz and the Baroque at this juncture, the argument opens itself to an aesthetic practice and philosophy that can help explain the aesthetics of stealth, as well as the political culture from which they emerge.

Of crucial importance is the baroque emphasis on the dynamism of form. Here, form is not simply imposed on a material but developed as an aspect of an active or vibrant matter as it envelops worldly excitements. Thus, baroque art is fascinated with pleated fabrics and garments because they extend, multiply, and transform the movements of the body animating it (Deleuze 2006, 139). The folded garment prehends and, in processing it, amplifies the expressive forces of the ongoing surrounding world. That is why Deleuze calls the Baroque the "informal art par excellence," where the "informal" must be understood as that which informs a process of existence through the transduction of potentials relationally distributed in the world (40; translation modified). Baroque art is informal because it highlights how worldly processes hold together by continuously modulating one another. In Italian baroque painting, for instance, this preoccupation is articulated

through the notions of *moto* and *affetto* (movement and affect). Here, affect is best thought in a nonpsychological way, referring first of all to the "vibrations, elasticities," "tendencies," or "efforts" by which matter relationally develops its modes of existence as its "affective qualities" (109–110). As the body moves, it may stir the pleated garment, but the garment picks up the movement in its own style, swirling lightly perhaps or billowing weightily, depending on the "molecular movements" that constitute the fabric's manner of being. So if *affetto* initially refers to the internal processual form-taking of matter, it also indicates how different "styles or manners" can inflect and activate one another. These potentials to affect thus express themselves in particular *moti*. Following the Baroque aesthetic, then, dynamic form is thoroughly recast as a mode or manner of informing: "the informal is not a negation of form: it posits form as folded, . . . folded forms are styles or manners" (40). "As a general rule the manner in which a material is folded is what constitutes its texture. It is defined less by its heterogenous and really distinct parts than by the style by which they become inseparable by virtue of particular folds" (41).

This general sketch of the baroque aesthetic can guide the present account of stealth in several ways. As the following section will elaborate in detail, the dynamic relation between affect and movement implies a relation of composition between "microperceptions" and "macroperceptions," where microperceptions themselves may remain under the threshold of the perceptible even as they recompose the macroperceptions available in the surrounding world. This in turn requires the prehension of other perspectives on the world and the relational informing of their styles or manners of existence.

The Americans

At the beginning of its very first episode (Weisberg and Batistick 2013), *The Americans* presents a scene of about two minutes that articulates the baroque prehensive ecologies, which enable an aesthetics of stealth. Elizabeth and Philip Jennings and their colleague Rob are tasked to capture a defector. Their plan is to intercept the target at night on a calm street in Washington, D.C. While Philip and Rob wait for their target outside behind the corner of a building, Elizabeth positions herself inside, on the first floor of an apartment building facing her collaborators' hiding place. In this way, they can communicate their target's position to each other without being detected; they

can get a visual of their approaching target without being seen themselves. The scene goes to some lengths to convey this sense of invisibility aesthetically. As the spies establish a line of sight between their positions, we barely catch a glimpse of them through half-opened doors and behind window curtains. Darkness and smoke further wrap them in relative opacity. Many close-ups cut each frame off from the wider surroundings. Darkness, mist, angles, blocked views, and close-ups are the visual techniques used here to make the viewer sense the furtiveness of the spies' operation. We perceive a concerted effort to be imperceptible and simultaneously prehend the target from multiple perspectives. This constructed duplicity—imperceptibility made perceptible—is at the heart of the aesthetic problem that this scene poses. Who is imperceptible here? And for whom?

Given that many shots frame their content in close-up or partially hidden behind out-of-focus obstructions, this sequence does not present a seamless pro-filmic space. It is a bit of an audiovisual maze. And, yet, as the sequence multiplies and refracts points of view, relational cues such as sightlines, head angles, lighting, and shade allow the viewer to compose a full sense of the surrounding world. So instead of establishing a continuous representational space, the image connects various points of view to let the viewer enter a functional network of perspectives, a field of mutual prehensions. Stealth always relies on such multiperspectivalism, the point of which is to grasp the affective and prehensive potentials distributed across the field. The aesthetics of stealth can be qualified as baroque, then, because they proliferate viewpoints that are integrated into a perceptual ecology in the interest of a targeted intervention. Interestingly, Deleuze and Leibniz both articulate this idea by way of Plotinus's original sketch of the monad as "a point of view on the city," a metaphor that will become quite literal as this chapter proceeds: "What can be apprehended from one point of view [say, Elizabeth's or Philip's] is therefore neither a determined street nor a relation that might be determined with other streets, which are constants, but the variety of all possible connections between the course of a given street and that of another. The city seems to be a labyrinth that can be ordered" (Deleuze 2006, 26).

The opening sequence of *The Americans* indeed renders the street corner as a labyrinth of affective and prehensive potentials. And as the suspense of the imminent capture makes palpable, these potentials create a contrast that is bound to discharge into open conflict. The goal is thus to modulate the perceptual maze in such a way that the spies' intervention can be executed

on their terms—that they can affect the surrounding world without being adversely affected themselves. As will shortly be seen, they are relatively unsuccessful at this. Stealth is a challenge.

But it is important to first unpack the full implications of the multiperspectival aesthetic that this sequence articulates. The proliferation of viewpoints is the series' way of performing what James J. Gibson has called an "ecological approach" to visual perception. Moving images can do this precisely because they are in motion and, thus, present "invariants" (surfaces, angles) under transformation (of ratios, proportions) in a changing "optic array" (Gibson 2015, 280). One of the achievements of Gibson's theory is to take into account the fact that the perceiving individual is in movement and therefore perceives the changing relations between surfaces in relation to their own displacement. This approach is termed "ecological" because it acknowledges that what is perceived or picked up is first and foremost a field of relationally distributed information.[4] A crucial consequence is that one can experience the surrounding world from several viewpoints at once:

> It is obvious that a motionless observer can see the world from a single fixed point of observation and can thus notice the perspectives of things. It is not so obvious but it is true that an observer who is moving about sees the world at *no* point of observation and thus, strictly speaking, *cannot* notice the perspectives of things. The implications are radical. Seeing the world at a traveling point of observation, over a long enough time for a sufficiently extended set of paths, begins to be perceiving the world at *all* points of observation, as if one could be everywhere at once. To be everywhere at once with nothing hidden is to be all-seeing, like God. Each object is seen from all sides, and each place is seen as connected to its neighbor. The world is *not* viewed in perspective. (Gibson 2015, 187–188; emphasis in original)

One possible conceptual confusion arises and must be immediately clarified: How can the aesthetic of *The Americans* be qualified as "multiperspectival" in light of Gibson's theory when Gibson himself holds that "the world is *not* viewed in perspective" at all? What Gibson rejects here is the conflation of our natural ways of perceiving the surrounding world with the "technique of picture-making" that Renaissance painters rightly referred to as "artificial perspective" (63).[5] Similarly, Deleuze states that "[it] does not suffice to state that the point of view apprehends a perspective, a profile that would each time offer the entirety of a city in its own fashion. For it also brings forth the connection of all the related profiles, the series of all curvatures or inflections" (2006, 26). Indeed, points of view must be understood as potential

"points of inflection" at which the "intrinsic singularity" of a process inflects or reorients itself as well as the worldly processes that feed into it (15). That is why the present account also follows both Deleuze and Gibson in speaking of "points of view" and refrains from assigning characters or spectators one particular (artificial) perspective. If the term is nonetheless retained in the notion of the *multiperspectival*, it should be understood in the broader Whiteheadian sense of any event's "perspective of the universe": "Each entity, of whatever type, essentially involves its own connection with the universe of other things. This connection can be viewed as being what the universe is for that entity either in the way of accomplishment or in the way of potentiality. It can be termed the perspective of the universe for that entity" (Whitehead 1968, 66).

The multiperspectival as it is used here is an attempt to generalize Gibson's insights into ecological perception to make them compatible with Whitehead's theory of prehensions laid out in chapter 2. Evidently, the audiovisual rendering of a perceptual ecology in *The Americans* is made for human eyes and ears, but this mode of perception constitutes only one particular—and limited—manner in which worldly entities prehend one another. So the opening sequence of *The Americans* is offered here as one insightful exemplar of more general prehensive dynamics. One could ask, for example, how these more general dynamics play out once they explicitly involve digital prehensity, such as in stealth video games. (An answer to this question will be provided shortly when this chapter turns to *Watch Dogs: Legion*.) In any case, the multiperspectival suggests that certain processes, including so-called higher organisms like humans as well as technological processes, not only have their own perspective of a shared world but can also prehend other existential perspectives of it. Such an ecological prehension-of-prehension is crucial to the aesthetics of stealth because it is a condition for grasping what has importance for the other perspectives of a shared world. It enables an understanding of the tendencies that a potentially adversarial perspective may follow and the antagonistic efforts that it may make to ensure the continuation of its process. And if the opening sequence of *The Americans* makes the viewer participate in such a multiperspectival perceptual ecology, it is to show that the point of such perceptual knowing is to prevent the expression of adversarial tendencies and efforts before the target can become aware of them. In this sense, stealth is a mode of preemptive action (Pape 2019). At this, however, the spies fail:

Once Elizabeth and Philip and their collaborator Rob are in position, they stay put and wait for the target to get closer. As the target approaches the unseen spies, the musical score first grows in volume and dramatic force, building toward the imminent encounter of the adversaries. But just before walking into the trap, the target stops short—and with him the musical score. In this moment of silence, the viewer can sense the target's hesitation, as well as the interruption in the operation's chain of events so carefully laid out by the agents. Should viewers listen for aural signs that might betray the secret agents' presence, they will be disappointed. Modes of prehension are, as was said, limited: We cannot see the target seeing his pursuers, nor can we hear any giveaway sounds that the spies might have accidentally made. And yet, despite the spies' best efforts at becoming imperceptible, the target somehow senses their presence and flees. How did he do it? This is indeed the aesthetic problem of the scene. What stands out for the viewers is the pronounced visibility of the Russian spy trio in contrast to the target. Even though the spies hide from their target, it is them who are exposed to the viewers, who can adequately map their positions within the perceptual ecology. The target, by contrast, remains audiovisually elusive from the beginning of the sequence, when he moves in the distance and through shadows, to the moment of the disrupted encounter, when the viewer can clearly perceive him but not what or how he perceives. The animated musical score contributes to the audiovisual saturation of this scene so that what disappears for the viewer in the audiovisual noise is the target itself. It is as if the sound and image skipped an important beat because they were so busy establishing the perceptual ecology between the spies themselves. As a result, the target's perspective of the universe cannot not be fully prehended. How can an aesthetic theory of stealth with a baroque bend account for this?

Following Deleuze's account of Leibniz's baroque theory of perception, the abovementioned affective qualities of a processual entity—its folds, vibrations, elasticities, and tendencies—are further agitated by "microperceptions" that are "representatives of the world" (2006, 98): "Microperceptions or representatives of the world are these little folds that unravel in every direction, folds in folds, over folds, following folds, like one of Hantaï's paintings, or one of Clérambault's toxic hallucinations. And these are minute, obscure, confused perceptions that make up our macroperceptions, our conscious, clear, and distinct apperceptions. Had it failed to bring together an infinite sum of minute perceptions that destabilize the preceding macroperception

while preparing the following one, a conscious perception would never happen" (Deleuze 2006, 98–99)

Two things are important here: First, conscious perception and all prehension more generally are a matter of composition. Elusive microperceptions can agglomerate and inform each other in such a manner that they unfold forms that are "notable or remarkable" to the human eye or ear. Thus, microperceptions can and often do participate in positive prehensions. But, once again, eye and ear—understood as modes of prehension—have their limits. "All consciousness is a matter of threshold," including perceptual thresholds (101). This means that microperceptions can also act in the world as negative prehensions; that is, without being included in an entity's internal constitution of its subjective form. The second important point, then, is that microperceptions can efficiently contribute to the composition of process while remaining under the threshold of conscious perception. They can also compose macroperception by destabilizing it. This is what happens in the opening scene of *The Americans*. All that the viewers—and presumably the Russian spies—can know is that something inflected the target's process of existence. Something somehow gave away that something was off on that street corner somewhere in Washington, D.C. But his unexpected awareness of the imminent stealth attack destabilizes the viewer's perception to the extent that it cannot be accounted for in terms of conscious perception of the representational information provided by image and sound. The viewer is left to conclude that the target must have picked up a microperception that refused to cross the viewer's threshold of perception, that the something off on the street corner entered experience by way of a negative prehension. This is, of course, because the sequence is edited in that way. There is supposed to be a gap in conscious perception, a beat that got skipped. This is to articulate that the true virtuoso of stealth in this scene, the person whose perceptions and actions remain elusive, is the target himself. He is a stealth virtuoso, then, because his experience of the world takes negative prehensions into account as positive facts of the world. He can thus perform what Brian Massumi calls "action-perception" (2015a, 98 passim).

Action-perception is a mode of perceptual awareness that is able to register microperceptions—the minute vibrations and tendencies that result from the commingling of wordly processes—within a perceptual ecology before they can fold into a macroperception. Thus, action-perception is a preconscious or nonconscious mode of relating to, and ultimately acting on,

the "pricklings" of potential futures as yet enfolded in one's surroundings (Deleuze 2006, 99). Indeed, such a mode of action, which disconnects action from ratiocination and regrounds it in perception and affect, is increasingly required by the geopolitical conflicts of recent history, which are characterized by an unsettling asymmetry between the visibility and exposure of state actors on the one hand and the diffuse threat of terrorism on the other.[6] The aesthetic of stealth articulates this problem for a broader audience: Is it possible to rationally deliberate on a strategy to fight an enemy if you do not know the enemy's position, personnel, or equipment? It isn't, and therefore, Massumi shows, recent military policy texts on "network-centric warfare" address this problem by transferring decision-making from strategic and rational instances of command to the event ecology of the network itself: "This epistemological incompleteness theorem [i.e., the irreducible unknowability of the enemy] at the basis of network-centric war is an expression of an ontological condition: the 'real time' of war is now the formative infra-instant of suspended perception. What are normally taken to be cognitive functions must telescope into that non-conscious interval. What would otherwise be cognition must zoom into the 'blink' between consciously registered perceptions—and in the same movement zoom instantly out into a new form of awareness" (Massumi 2015a, 97).

This new form of networked or ecological awareness[7] of one's implication in a perceptual event ecology is a crucial element of the aesthetic of stealth. It is so important that the opening sequence of *The Americans* carefully plots out a perceptual ecology for viewers, only to trip them up with an instance of action-perception. Through this experience of audiovisual incompleteness, the viewers are forewarned that the aesthetics of stealth in this series will also test their thresholds of perception and consciousness. We must be like Leibniz's "animal on the alert" [*l'animal aux aguets*] because "there are always minute perceptions that are not integrated into the present perception" (Deleuze 2006, 99). There is always more to find in one's surroundings that may cross the threshold of the perceptible to turn into a prehension of pain or worse (Stengers 2017, 69). And just as for the animal, Isabelle Stengers specifies that this is very much a "pragmatic preoccupation" concerning life and death rather than a matter of "conscious representation" (69). Perhaps that is why this crucial element of stealth aesthetics is rendered in the opening sequence of *The Americans* without being represented.

In any case, the contrast between the Russian spies and their target allows this opening sequence to approach and activate the threshold of perception from both directions. It makes the spies' practice of hiding pass into visibility and renders the target's action-perception imperceptible, certainly in terms of its efficient causation. This chiasmic play around the threshold is at the heart of the aesthetic of stealth. Stealth, when experienced through media, is a dance around the threshold of the perceptible because media themselves have to render the becoming-imperceptible of stealth in their sensory modes (sight and sound in this case). In other words, stealth implies the holding of a contrast: the perceptible and imperceptible are articulated through one another and, in this way, they coexist in the closest experiential proximity as microperceptions and macroperceptions that processually fold into one another. In this way, stealth forces perception to tremble on the threshold of the perceptible, a threshold that is moreover relational and dynamic. As the openings for imperceptibility continuously change, it is more accurate to speak of stealth aesthetics as a continuous *thresholding* within a perceptual ecology.

This scene stands out as emblematic for the *The Americans* and the aesthetics of stealth because it shows two parties trying to "outstealth" one another by means of a prehensive one-upmanship around the threshold of the perceptible: points of view and prehensions have proliferated; connection after connection has been made for us. Yet something slips through the cracks. What creates a moment of awe is precisely the elusiveness of effective stealth. Thus, the scene undermines the spy fantasy that it constructs by making the target perceive its perceivers. Right from the beginning, then, *The Americans* denies the fantasy that observers could in any way separate themselves from the world they observe. Targets and pursuers are embedded in a perceptual ecology in which processes cannot help but inform one another. The goal of stealth is a way of obscuring these connections without rupturing them. This contributes to the high risks of stealth.

Hacking the Smart City in *Watch Dogs: Legion*

This flexible attunement to perceptual thresholds becomes even more of a pragmatic problem in stealth video games, where the player themself takes over the task of remaining imperceptible. Many stealth video games enable

the player to do this by creatively folding the digital environment to create experiences of the world that can only negatively prehend the presence of the stealth agent. The baroque qualities of this gameplay style are clearly observable in the video game *Watch Dogs: Legion*.

Watch Dogs: Legion, henceforth WDL, is the third main entry in the *Watch Dogs* series. Each game is set in a realistic model of a global city. After the first two games were set in Chicago and San Francisco, respectively, WDL is set in a near-futuristic London policed by a private security company. The story can be summarized as a conventional action-adventure plot in which the player has to take revenge on a conspiratorial and power-hungry corpocracy: After a series of anonymous terrorist attacks, the private security company Albion has been given access to London's smart city infrastructure and is in the process of establishing an Orwellian surveillance state. Albion has also been successful in wrongly accusing the hacker collective DedSec of carrying out said terrorist attacks. The player operates several members of this hacker collective and is tasked to fight Albion by hacking its smart city infrastructure. WDL imagines resistance to the smart surveillance city as a form of *technostealth* through a distributed networked agency.

It is perhaps not surprising that many stealth games are set in urban spaces. Even before the implementation of smart city infrastructures, urban spaces harbored desires and affordances for stealth. Conventional understandings of (especially) modern cities describe them as dense, heterogeneous social spaces whose components and subsystems operate in highly complex ways. In seminal studies of the metropolis by Louis Wirth (1938), for example, social relations in cities are characterized by anonymity, superficiality, and transitoriness. All of this makes urban environments opaque to a certain degree. Both the functional operations of the city as an organized whole and the dealings of its numerous denizens are beyond the grasp of any one individual. On the one hand, this relative opacity of urban spaces makes them dangerous; on the other hand, it makes urban spaces amenable to stealth because it allows for tactical imperceptibility by moving into these opaque domains of city life. The city is indeed a labyrinth (Deleuze 2006, 26). Stealth games draw on these aspects of the urban imaginary to motivate core gameplay mechanics of hiding, deception, and distraction in various ways. Consider, for instance, the *Assassin's Creed* series, which has titles set in Renaissance Florence, Rome, and Constantinople as well as revolutionary Paris, Victorian London, and many other historical cities.

In WDL, this challenge of being stealthy is complicated by the integrated surveillance apparatus of the smart city, which acts against the abovementioned opacities. So in WDL, the digital infrastructure that supports the smart city promises to finally make the opaque processes of urban organization commensurable with desires for comprehensive data extraction, processing, and control. Utopian visions of what Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell have termed the "smartness mandate" see it as "enabling a mode of automated, and seemingly apolitical, decision-making that would guarantee the survival of the human species in the face of pressing . . . challenges" (2022, 1–2). But this potential for optimization has of course been overdetermined by political interests, as many have pointed out. In her *Atlas of AI*, Kate Crawford points to former US secretary of defense Ash Carter's strategy to harness digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) for military purposes in what he called the Third Offset strategy (2021, 187–188). An offset is "a way of compensating for an underlying military disadvantage by changing the conditions" (187–188). If stealth planes were part of what Carter considered the Second Offset, then the third should be a "combination of AI, computational warfare, and robots" (188). The strategic disadvantage that must be compensated for this time is the complexity of contemporary societies and the unforeseeable fallout of complex nonlinear processes. Smartness "understands threats as emerging from an environment that, because it is always more complex than the systems it encompasses, can never be captured in the simple schemas of rivalry or game theory. This in turn allows smartness to take on an ecological dimension: the key crisis is no longer simply that emerging from rival political powers or nuclear disaster but rather, more fundamentally, intrinsically unforeseeable events that will necessarily continue to emerge from an always too-complex environment" (Halpern and Mitchell 2022, 5). To maintain stable operations, the cybernetic smart city has to "know [its denizens] by their metadata," which are harvested to feed algorithmic control systems that can respond to disturbances of optimal operations in real time and in a precise manner. This also implies a particular understanding of social and political change as merely the incremental modulation of complex processes. The possibility of substantial social change through large-scale structural transformation is intentionally sidelined. Indeed, as Gillian Rose points out, the intervention of human intelligence becomes increasingly superfluous as smart networks protect the order of operations in a seemingly autonomous and thus apolitical manner (2019, 107). The utopian goal of

the smart city is the dream of cybernetic control: the maintenance of urban space as a system of continuously regulated flows of energy and information. Hence, the cybernetic task of the smart city is to eliminate, incorporate, or otherwise compensate for any unforeseeable event that might disturb or disrupt the system. In WDL, the smart city's project consists in the organized suppression of contingency.

Thus, the narrative setup of WDL squarely situates its near-future version of London in the context of excessive and asymmetrical digital prehensity outlined in chapter 2 and explicitly relates it to surveillance culture and cybernetic control. This is also clearly articulated in the gameplay. If the player confronts an Albion security operative, steals a car, or causes a traffic accident, a slew of drones will immediately intervene to suppress the source of social disorder. Here, WDL aligns itself with critical views of the smart city by relating it to predictive policing. While the smart infrastructure makes urban processes transparent and citizens vulnerable, those owning and operating that infrastructure can conceal their actions and remain out of reach. All of this is to say that the player, in the role of the resistant denizen, is better off moving through the smart city's finely meshed surveillance matrix without being detected. Now, how does WDL articulate this in its gameplay? And how is this an instance of digital baroque?

As in many open-world stealth games like *Metal Gear Solid V* or *Assassin's Creed* games since *Origins*, many roads and areas in WDL's London are relatively safe to enter as one moves from one point of interest to another. But the open world is speckled with "restricted areas," full of hostile guards, surveillance cameras, motion capture devices, armored drones, and other surveillance technology. It is in these restricted areas—which can be corporate offices, construction sites, and other proprietary and architecturally complex locations—that many of the campaign missions need to be carried out. A usual mission in the game tasks the player to physically access a server in a remote corner of the restricted area or rescue an ally from a detention cell that is difficult to reach. Thus, a successful resistance mission consists in navigating the game architecture and reaching the target without being prehended by the sensing devices of the smart city. To do this, the player can and must frequently hack into Albion's surveillance system and manipulate it in their favor. To return to what was said in chapter 2, the player must harness occlusion and intrusion.

Figure 4.1
View of a restricted construction site from a surveillance camera that the player has hacked into. All highlights and icons indicate a hackable object. Screenshot from *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft 2020).

Figure 4.2
View from a hacked surveillance camera on the same construction site. After hacking a minivan, the player can remotely steer it to distract the enemy patrolling the area. Screenshot from *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft 2020).

This requires tech-enhanced action-perception. The games' interface not only renders a three-dimensional photorealistic London, it also overlays it with numerous visual cues, such as visual icons for enemy positions or trace maps for their movements. Most importantly, however, the interface indicates each and every hackable item in the player's visual field (see figures 4.1 and 4.2). In the fiction of WDL, these cues indicate ongoing worldly processes that can be modulated in real time as the player moves through that world. The interface of WDL thus works like a "smart visor" that embeds initially environmental information in the sense mode of vision "as affordances rather than featuring in it as focused content" (Massumi 2015b, 128). Every visual cue indicates a potential action that the player may actualize in the next moment. Since such decisions must be taken from within a complex, dynamic and hostile environment, the processing of these cues cannot be left to ratiocination. For example:

> A numerical indication of distance on a smart visor can increase the accuracy of targeting. But this can work only if the number is not experienced in such a way as to trigger a calculation in the shooter's skull. It is already a calculation *in the machine* precisely so it doesn't have to be one in the time-pressured war head. Instead, its seeing must instantaneously, unreflectingly trigger a postural modulation of the shooter's body or an instantaneous recalibration of the weapon setting. The number must be performatively transduced into posture and gesture, in the instant. It must already have hit the body as "actionable" information. (Massumi 2015b, 130; emphasis in original)

The interface of WDL similarly provides the player with a panoply of actionable cues or affordances that the player must "instantaneously, unreflectingly" transduce to modulate their environment in their favor. In this sense, WDL is a training arena for action-perception. When the analysis now looks at gameplay in more detail, it should be kept in mind that much of the gameplay action happens "on the fly"; that is, in the middle of an active urban battleground. Thus when the argument involves higher cognitive functions such as calculation or ratiocination, these should be thought of as "operatively fused" into perception, as suggested by Massumi: "sensing, deciding and acting" are "brought together into a single 'complex functionality'" (127).

The game spaces in WDL are effectively environmental—that is, complex and dynamic—puzzles with multiple moving parts. And the gameplay engages with the sensing devices of the smart city network: Every restricted area in the game contains dozens of security cameras that can be hacked,[8] which means

that the interface switches to the point of view of the hacked camera. In this way, players can study the environment they have to infiltrate. Players can also hack their way from one camera to the next so that an entire building can be scouted out before an avatar actually enters it. Here, hacking the smart city partly consists in moving through as many of its points of view as needed to establish how the various elements of surveillance cooperate to make the environment hostile, as well as to prehend how and what the environment prehends. This makes WDL the rare third-person action adventure that constantly requires players to change points of view and integrate them into an ecological perception of the game space as a whole.[9] Through this rendering of the multiperspectival, players can grasp how the game software articulates and understands certain fundamental values such as perceived presence.[10] In other words, players gather various perspectives of a technologically rendered digital environment to get a sense, a feel, for the technology's margin of indetermination: To what degree is it open to be informed by player input without certain in-game entities registering that input?

Once the player has the lay of the simulated land, they can create openings for undetected movement toward the target by moving around the pieces of the rule-based environmental puzzle. For example, following the algorithmic rules of WDL, guards and drones patrol the game space in regular patterns of direction and speed, with various ways and levels of prehensity and responsiveness. These algorithmically generated patterns must be creatively manipulated or circumvented by the player by means of a vast array of hacking mechanics and other tech-based gameplay modifiers. Guards can be distracted or lured away; drones can be repurposed; security doors can be deactivated, etc. Ideally, interventions are made in such a way that they remain under the threshold of what the smart infrastructures itself can perceive.

So the core gameplay of WDL pursues two aesthetic processes that can be qualified as baroque. First, it is about perceiving how all the different elements of the environment move in concert to create a near-comprehensive surveillance matrix. The gameplay foregrounds the "concertation" of many minor elements that form a complex moving whole (Deleuze 2006, 152–153). To borrow one of Leibniz's dicta, which he borrowed from Hippocrates, the technostealth of WDL simulates a smart surveillance network to allow players to understand how "everything" in that digital environment "conspires" to ensure maximum prehensity: The player has to appreciate how the elements constituting the environment are carefully arranged in such a way

as to foreclose a presence that can be positively prehended without harm. "Tout est conspirant" (everything breathes together) is Leibniz's way of saying that the components of experience make a world for each other, and that to participate in this world is to conspire or breathe with them (1898, 106). This breathing-with is the second, kinesthetic process foregrounded in the core gameplay: one has to playfully participate in the complex relational field that the game software constructs to modulate it so that it will allow for a presence that is negatively prehended at all times, and thus is "safe" in gameplay terms. The mechanics of the game provide a variety of techniques and tools to accomplish these core gameplay tasks, two of which will be emphasized in the following: first, the distribution of the player's agency across the game environment and, second, the modulation of the smart environment through series of small diversions and minor deviations that compose or concert alternative macroperceptions for the surveillance matrix.

In WDL, the player's input can be distributed across what one might call human-technology assemblages. Even though one can only play as one team member of the DedSec collective at a time (more about this in a moment), the avatar's zone of action can be extended to several digital devices at the same time. While the player hides their active operative in a safe spot, for instance, they can deploy a "spiderbot" to take out an enemy and access servers and other devices remotely (see figure 4.3). While the spiderbot is largely bound to the floor and moves mainly horizontally, drones can be a further addition to the operative assemblage and allow for vertical exploration and various other hacking interventions. The deployment of simulated human-technology assemblages in WDL is one more way of getting a feel for how the algorithmic environment folds digital prehensions into a functional whole. It foregrounds the aesthetic aspect of technostealth, insofar as it enables a tentative and ongoing testing of how prehensive and responsive the simulated game space is. Indeed, in particularly difficult stealth challenges, one has to experiment with exactly how far one can go or how much time one has to execute an action without drawing attention. Here, stealth gameplay rejoins baroque aesthetics because, as Ndalianis says quoting Omar Calabrese, its aesthetic principles "stretch against the limit of a system, thus testing 'the elasticity of the border, but without destroying it'" (2004, 1992). Given that video games are software that renders output (i.e., image, sound, vibration) by algorithmically processing player input, these observations can

be rephrased to assert that a stealth game like WDL effectively trains players in perceiving the prehensity of digital algorithms.

Playing a stealth game is about finding out what counts as an input value for the software and how this input is processed. It is in this specific sense that stealth games problematize the tremendous prehensive capacities of digital technology. Furthermore, the elements of the human-technology assemblage—avatar, spiderbot, drone—can remain in use at the same time to make targeted interventions in the environment. Even though the interface shows the point of view of only one of these elements at any given moment and requires the player to quickly switch between them if they are to move in concert, the fast and skillful switches between these centers of action create the impression that one can effectively act in several places at the same time. By way of multiplying centers of action in this manner, the player can modulate the algorithmic environment in complex ways, distracting a guard over here and disabling a laser detector over there to create safe passage.[11]

What exactly a player can do in any given situation also depends on the operatives whom one has recruited into the DedSec resistance. To develop their own play style for moving through such a hostile algorithmic environment, the player in WDL is tasked with establishing a network of DedSec operatives. WDL marks a departure in the series because, instead of playing as one main character with proper psychological depth and development, one has to build a team by recruiting fellow Londoners into the DedSec resistance. Indeed, almost every nonplayable character (NPC) whom the player encounters in London can be recruited for one's "team." Once they have joined the team, these characters become playable, and one can switch between operatives at almost all times (except in the middle of a mission). Importantly, these operatives have certain characteristics or perks that set them apart from each other. For example, if you recruit a police officer or medical professional, they can get an operative out of jail or hospital more quickly. (The hospital or jail is where your team member goes when they "die" in the game. Shorter stays at either institution mean that the team member becomes playable again more quickly.) The perks that potential recruits would bring to the team can be easily viewed by scanning Londoners (see figure 4.3). So the technostealth of WDL uses the city's smart sensors to infiltrate its main vulnerability: people. In WDL, the population itself becomes a network of potential allies, each with something to contribute

to the roster of team members. Against the all-encompassing web of surveillance technology, then, WDL pits a heterogeneous collective of engaged civilians. This is the "legion" referred to in the title of the game. From a gameplay perspective, this foregrounds the strategic aspect of technostealth. A productive deployment of one's team requires that the player always think strategically in terms of which team member's affordances are helpful in any given situation. In a video game, these affordances are often relatively minor algorithmic procedures that modify the range of player input: a hacking perk might allow the player to hack keycards more quickly or from a greater distance, for instance. Importantly, though, WDL sports an impressive range of perks that modify the gameplay in myriad minor ways, from the mundane to the eccentric. While a particularly fast getaway vehicle is useful when stealth fails, it is also much more conventional than a magician's ability to hypnotize enemies and turn them against their allies. The important point to note is that the gameplay mechanics of WDL provide the payer with a large set of techniques and manners that downright require them to develop an individual play style. There are so many perks and gameplay modifiers that most players are bound to fail at trying all or even just the majority of these digital affordances. Instead, one tends to gravitate toward those that resonate well with the player's general disposition. For a stealthy play style, one may want to recruit a beekeeper with a swarm of robotic bees. If you're in a nerdy mood for ridiculous gaming antics, you may recruit a Londoner who constantly gives away his position to enemies due to his unfortunate flatulence. The game also has spontaneous beatboxers and pole dancers ready for recruitment. The point really is to experiment and see what will happen, how a certain trait or procedure informs the digital environment. These perks and gameplay modifiers are the minute inflection points that wait to be creatively folded into the more encompassing macroscopic processings of the game software. Thus, the particular challenge that WDL formulates for the player is to explore the vast trove of minor gameplay perks and modifiers to build their own network of distributed digital affordances and deploy them selectively to exploit the vulnerabilities of the fictional smart city.

WDL's dystopian smart city narrative may be quite conventional. But the aspects of its gameplay highlighted here indicate an interesting "algorithmic imaginary" that is preoccupied with digital prehensity (Bucher 2017). By means of the multiperspectival exploration and modulation of the environment, the game enables an involutionary engagement with its software.

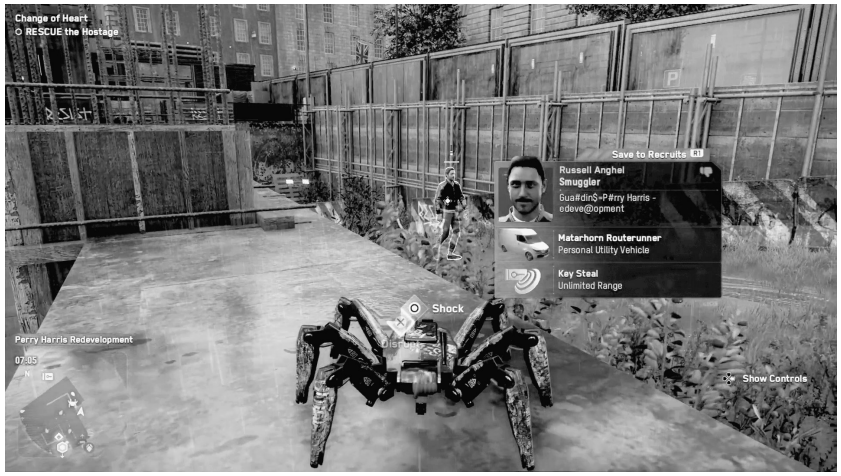


Figure 4.3
The player has deployed a spiderbot to navigate the game space while the human avatar stays in hiding. The spiderbot is hacking an enemy to reveal relevant information: if recruited to the player's team, this NPC would contribute the perk "Key Steal" to the team, meaning that hacking access keys for restricted areas would become easier. The interface also indicates that this enemy can be eliminated by using the spiderbot's "shock" weapon. Screenshot from *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft 2020).

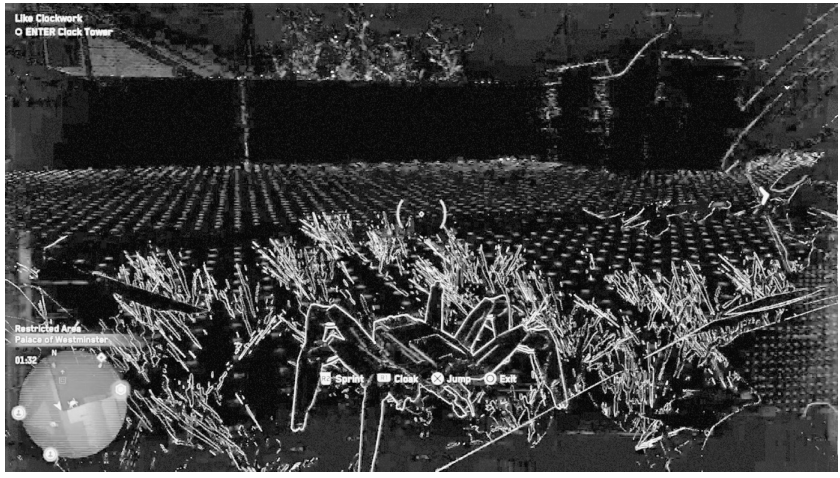


Figure 4.4
Screenshot of the brief transition moments between hacks. Instead of a regular representational image (as in figure 4.3), the interface renders the spiderbot and the surroundings through neon-colored frames and hatchings.

As the player moves through and tweaks the digital environment in myriad minor ways, they come to understand the responsiveness of the gaming software from the inside out. By grasping the algorithmic logic that renders the interface, players learn to build burrows into the surveillance matrix. As they fold digital affordances for imperceptibility around their processual presence, they can effectively immure themselves in the digital environment itself. That WDL wants players to understand the audiovisual interface as the aesthetic surface of the underlying game software is not only evidenced by the fact that the in-game London functions like a smart city, but also by other design choices. In the quick switches between cameras and other hackable devices, the space rendered by the interface is briefly reduced to basic geometric shapes (see figure 4.4). This temporary reduction of London to "data frames" is reminiscent of *The Matrix*'s green "digital rain" aesthetic, in which material reality is revealed to be composed of cascades of green code. Another case in point is that the game was critiqued for its lack of character development and character-driven story arcs. None of the many procedurally generated Londoners that one can recruit have any psychological depth to speak of. This is a technical necessity because the game's main story—including all spoken dialogue—has to be compatible with all potential recruits. As a result, the playable characters populating London are easily perceived as polygonous husks for a few particular digital affordances. The interface of WDL is *dataphanous*, so to speak, conveying that interacting with the video game is indeed a matter of working with the complex algorithmic affordances of a gaming software.

In this algorithmic imaginary, engagement with the game's software and interface—but also resistance to the smart mandate more generally—consists in modulating the digital environment through series of "minor gestures" distributed across the game space and enhanced by small strategic gameplay modifiers (Manning 2016, 20). Like many other open-world games, WDL provides its player with a "sandbox," meaning that it allows gamers to engage in free and inventive play by providing a malleable material basis and flexible interaction design. Indeed, the game is built for emergent gameplay moments, in which the familiar game mechanics are concerted in such a way as to produce unforeseen effects that the game software in turn processes in unexpected ways. Players are invited to develop their own singular play styles because they are manners of intuitively introducing spontaneity into

the game's algorithmic environment. When a player is "in the zone," they sense the potential for a certain effect as the appetite that certain mechanics or techniques may have for one another precisely because their concertation is as yet unknown or appears ludicrous. Experiments toward emergent gameplay often fail or fall flat, but they can also create series of digital prehensions that diverge from the rule-based responsiveness of the game engine and shift it to novel ways of prehending and processing player input. Indeed, moments of emergent gameplay in WDL are contingencies orchestrated *with* the cybernetic system of capture. In this way, the game affirms what one might call a *mannerist* disposition toward the digital. This may be taken in two related senses.

In aesthetic theory, mannerism refers to the "self-conscious stylization" of an aesthetic idiom, often one that is beginning to be perceived as historical or traditional (Vidal 2012, 29). Mannerist moments and movements are invested in the perceptual surfaces rather than narrative or psychological depth. In this focus on surfaces, mannerisms tend to reproduce received aesthetic principles with a distorting twist and a penchant for exuberant artifice. Conventional forms are exaggerated, distorted, or fractalized to reach toward the immanent limit of a principle's productivity (32). Hence, there is also the involutionary appetite for a proliferation of fragments and details that never completely loses sight of the larger scaffold of principles that enables and accommodates its own internal complication. Mannerist art is often described as excessive and extravagant, even vulgar. "Less is a bore," the mannerist architect Robert Venturi famously quipped (1992, 17; see also 2004).

In light of these observations, WDL can easily be seen as mannerist in this first sense. The game stylizes the already tired open-world formula established by Ubisoft itself and internally complicates it through the DedSec recruitment system and a panoply of other gameplay modifiers (Delaney 2021). It draws attention to the fact that the dataphanous interface is an aesthetic surface developed by the dynamic concertation of interlocking algorithmic principles. This ostentatious dynamism makes the game's overall algorithmic and aesthetic shape relatively indeterminate or open to infinite creative deformation. Finally, the game fosters the exploration and serial implementation of minor digital gestures to produce novel and astonishing macroscopic effects.

In a second and philosophical sense, the technostealth of WDL affirms what Didier Debaise has called a "universal" or "cosmological mannerism"

(2017, 64). Working toward the concept of a universal mannerism, Debaise first engages with Whitehead's concept of the superject to rethink subjectivity as a collection of manners:

> This [the subject as "superjacio"] could be translated in a variety of ways: "to throw above," or "to hurl toward." It no longer refers to a fully realized subject but rather to a tendency: "The aim is at that complex of feeling which is the enjoyment of those data in that way." It is in the interior of feeling itself, in its forms, that this latent subjectivity is situated. It is, as Whitehead puts it, the manner in which feeling deploys itself. This subject is essentially a manner, the manner in which an experience is fashioned, the manner in which something is felt, the manner of witnessing. Each feeling is characterized by its own manner, a tonality that distinguishes it from all other feelings. (Debaise 2017, 57)

It is important to immediately note that precisely because "there is no distinction between subject and manner" (58), the subject as superject does not simply choose or adopt certain mannerisms: "The subject does not project onto nature, onto its experience, the manners that it will make its own, on the contrary, it is the local manners of prehending, of capturing and integrating, that form the conditions of individuation for an experiencing subject. Manners are therefore immanent to novelty, they are required for the production of a new subject" (Debaise, 2017, 65).

Each domain of existence is already composed of local manners and processual modes that give that domain relative consistency. And these manners are expressions of the feeling or affective tonality that govern that domain. This is what Debaise means by "universal mannerism": not a mannerism that is true or valid anywhere anytime, but the universe thought as an immense constellation of manners of being that processually interlink. A most important manner for participating in the universe as a mannerist superject is to heed the universe's "sense of conformation"; that is, to anticipate the "conformation of the future to the present" (2017, 46). Simply put, in a processual universe, change is bound to occur, and one must proceed in a manner that allows the integration of one's existence with the attending universe. One has to conspire. This means, as Debaise points out, that one's subjective existence is conditioned on the universe's mannerism as locally expressed.

Following this conceptualization, the technostealth of WDL is a tactical mode of operation that engages with the existential manners of that part of the universe which we call "the digital." And it engages with these manners of the world to invent new superjective modes and procedures for negative

prehension in a hostile environment. This means that the mannerisms of stealth are first and foremost a project of world-making. Indeed, in an era so strongly shaped by digital technology, one is inclined to consider WDL's technostealth as an instance of what Deleuze, following Leibniz, calls the "game of the world" (2006, 75; translation modified). Different from Nietzsche, for whom the playfulness of the world is tantamount to the affirmation of chance, Leibniz's game of the world affirms the "proliferation of principles," where the task is to know "what hidden principle responds to any given object" (77; translation modified). In sandbox games generally, and in stealth games of this kind in particular, productive moments of play are "executed through excess and not a lack of principles" (77).

The numerous small procedures—perks and gameplay modifiers—that inflect the game's algorithmic procedures are so many principles whose efficiency exceeds their immediate purpose or usefulness. Creatively linked into functional series, these digital manners allow for emergent gameplay that develops solutions unforeseen even by the developers but enfolded in the software as affordances to be activated. In other words, then, the digital artwork provides a finite set of techniques and procedures that can be infinitely concerted into divergent series of worldly prehensions, each fold inflecting how the world comes to experience itself. By moving with the algorithmic logic and procedures of the cybernetic system, the player can maintain a divergent manner of being in the midst of the system's optimizing pressures, to affirm an exuberant singularity against all odds. As in baroque art, the software envelops procedural folds that can be infinitely developed to undermine the prehensive ubiquity of the digital architecture. In stealth gameplay, as in the baroque game of the world, the point is to skillfully "conjure a void without giving way to absence" (Deleuze 2006, 77). That is, one staunchly affirms one's presence in a hostile environment, but in such a way that hostility finds nothing on which to project itself. In this way, stealth becomes a "nonbattle": "You don't catch your adversary in order to reduce him to absence, you encircle his presence to neutralize him, to make him incompossible, to impose divergence upon him" (77). Indeed, later chapters of this book will show that stealth as a mode of world-making can be conceived and practiced as explicitly peaceful.

This peace or harmony is something to remain suspicious of. After all, the harmonization of worldly processes by means of ubiquitous prehensity is also the stated goal of the smart city. In the *tout-est-conspirant* of the smart city, the

targeted harmony is an interested one that pursues the extraction of value from private individuals, as well as the transformation of political action into gestures of optimization. More important, however, is the immense prehensive asymmetry that constitutes the digital world as we know it and that conditions the desire for stealth. The feeling or affective tonality that pervades the cultural processing of the digital is characterized by distrust, apprehension, and fear. Much as Leibniz did, Debaise explicates the universal mannerism through the example of "an alert animal" (2017, 70). He emphasizes that it is not so much that the animal "has" fear, but that fear is distributed across the animal's domain of experience. It is the manner or mode of existence of the animal's world: "It is only by pure convention that we say that an animal *has* a fear, as it is clear that the fear is in each of its actions and, more often than not, has taken possession of the acts before the animal is aware of it. We should say, rather, that the animal is possessed by fear and this possession is not something general, as it is situated in particular acts. Each action is inhabited by a modality of fear" (Debaise 2017, 70; emphasis in original).

Stealth as a political practice and cultural fantasy is premised on such atmospheric fear. It seeks harmonization with a potentially hostile and violent milieu, be it "only" the violence of extractivist data capitalism. The manners of stealth are imbued with the apprehension of involuntary exposure. And the harmonization toward a nonbattle comes at a price that some find hard to pay: the active production of negative prehensions of one's existence. And yet, as later chapters will show, stealth harbors the promise that, in the interstices of a surveillance matrix, a micropolitics may take shape that pragmatically refashions the dominant order from within.

5 The Politicality of Imperceptibility, Now and Then: An Interlude

Chapter 4 argued that contemporary stealth aesthetics have a particularly baroque inclination. But what political difference does that make? How do aesthetic principles and conventions process and inform political outlooks on the world?

Walter Benjamin has answered these questions for the German baroque drama, or *Trauerspiel*. In his book *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, Benjamin shows that the main characteristics of baroque dramas by Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, Andreas Gryphius, and others—among which a preoccupation with appearances and their maintenance, convoluted schemes, and an "intriguer" who sows confusion—negotiate a concept of sovereignty and a social theory for their time:

> Of all the deeply torn and divided epochs of European history, the Baroque is the only one to occur in a period of unshakeable domination by Christianity. The medieval avenue of rebellion—heresy—was closed to it, in part precisely because Christianity maintained its authority with such tenacity, but above all because, in the heterodox nuances of doctrinal teaching and practice, the ardor of a new worldly will could not even remotely come to expression. Since, therefore, neither rebellion nor subjection was religiously viable, *the collective energy of the epoch was directed toward a complete revolution of the content of life under the orthodox preservation of ecclesiastical forms. This had to lead to the suppression of genuine, direct human expression.* (Benjamin 2019, 65–66; emphasis added)

The seventeenth century in Europe experiences a strong thrust of secularization in the fields of science, culture, and politics, but it cannot yet shake off the powerful network of religious institutions that governs many aspects of society. So even though this epoch develops and formulates new values to guide German society, religion nominally retained its authority and must be reckoned with. To avoid conflict with these archaic institutions, the age

required people to obstruct the "genuine, direct expression" of their thoughts and feelings, the deeper-seated "content of life," so to speak. For Benjamin, the Baroque obsession with aesthetic surfaces is a cultural expression of this social situation. Art that foregrounds the creation of efficient appearances also rehearses the crucial social challenge that consists in satisfying a potentially punitive prehensive network while beginning to foster alternative relations in various social domains.

Under these circumstances, the intriguer or schemer becomes a central figure of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* because they understand politics as a matter of human affects, that is, ultimately, a matter of prehension: "[The intriguer's] depraved calculations interest the spectator of the *Haupt- und Staatsaktionen* all the more surely insofar as the latter recognizes here not only a mastery of the political machine but also an anthropological, even physiological knowledge that stirs him deeply. The superior intriguer is all intellect and will" (Benjamin 2019, 85; emphasis in original). The intriguer is the one whose thinking is thoroughly invested in feeling. They understand that affects are the drivers of human behavior and that these affects constitute a "calculable engine" (Benjamin 2019, 86; translation modified). Thus, in an explicitly Machiavellian lineage, the baroque art of politics consist in the manipulation of affects. A related consequence, according to Benjamin, is that baroque drama has no interest in notions of moral virtue: "Since, in the understanding of the age, all historical life has deviated from virtue, the latter became meaningless also for the inner life of characters in the drama. Never did it appear less interesting than in the heroes of these trauerspiels" (80). Human action then is only apparently guided by rational principles or moral commandments when, really, it seeks to tactically affect the surrounding world to conform it to its will (to power). This does not mean that individuals and groups do not have any values or virtues, but rather that society harbors values and virtues that are so at odds with each other that they cannot publically and peacefully coexist.

Importantly, from the specific perspective of the Baroque epoch itself, this overall outlook is *not* specific or contingent to the seventeenth century. Rather, the political aesthetic of the Baroque is this epoch's specific translation of "the *world-historical dynamic* into political action" (Benjamin 2019, 86; emphasis added). In this view, the politicality of perception is an aspect of world history in general, but how different epochs engage with the perceptual or aesthetic aspect of world history may differ. Radically new social

ideas—as empirical science and the bourgeoisie with its ideas of constitutional government were at the time—often need to propagate clandestinely before daring to expose themselves publicly. It is well known, for example, that the establishment of so-called modern democracies heavily relied on secret societies and conspiracy thinking, both to protect new political thinking and to undermine the political status quo (see, e.g., Assmann 2014, 95–112; and Dean 2002, 47–78, and chapter 7 of this book). Indeed, the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest that novelty needs to shroud itself in a process of "becoming-imperceptible" to weather the conservative drag of established institutions (279–309).

The question arises, then, of how the transhistorical investment in matters of perception and affect have contributed to the development of our current political culture. Previous chapters have highlighted that the cultural technique of stealth is facilitated by digital technology. It was also indicated how the contemporary politics of perception develop into an aesthetic preoccupation with technological prehensity. But how does all this relate to developments in political culture? To what extent does stealth inform certain fundamental notions of our political imaginary? The following chapters of this book will provide various divergent answers to these questions, always in relation to concrete media examples. This interlude attempts to provide a more general historical frame for the subsequent arguments.

The history of stealth since the 1970s can also be told as a story of remarkable transformation of the "content of life" under the "orthodox preservation" of the forms of life: the successful implementation of neoliberal agendas throughout the world has subsumed most areas of public life to economic principles while maintaining the hollow forms of social democracy. Similar to Benjamin's argument regarding the seventeenth century, then, people's lived social reality has dramatically changed, even though the reassuring framework of authoritative political institutions is largely intact. This is no small feat, which requires that the concerns of aggressive world-making be articulated through a public discourse that insists on the conservation of political institutions and heritage. As a result, political life itself is hollowed out and reorganized according to economic principles. This furtive intrusion of economic thought into political life is the reason why, according to Wendy Brown (2015), neoliberalism's "undoing of the demos" constitutes a "stealth revolution." This view is supported by the historian Nancy MacLean,

who, in her book *Democracy in Chains*, provides a detailed account of the role that institutional secrecy and surreptitiousness have played in the neoliberal transformation of political culture. Tracing the long history of American radical libertarianism from its nineteenth-century lodestar John C. Calhoun to its present-day paragons like James M. Buchanan and the Koch brothers, MacLean shows that this libertarian elite developed what the author calls a "stealth plan for America," which was successful precisely because it circumvented public scrutiny and transparency (2017, vii). The purpose of this plan was indeed to transform the workings of democratic societies while leaving their representative institutions intact. How was this done? What does this imply concretely? In answering this question, the point here is not to provide a thorough account of neoliberalism's economic principles.[1] Rather, the focus is on the strategies by which an *economic* paradigm with deleterious effects for a majority of people—effects such as the erosion of social security systems, the deregulation of markets, the increasing precariousness of labor and the dependence on debt—has been able to establish itself as a leading paradigm in the *political* sphere. Three key aspects will be highlighted.

The organized resurgence of liberal and libertarian thought in the US in the second half of the twentieth century can be seen as a reaction to both the New Deal and civil rights movements, which temporarily improved the distribution of wealth within society, as well as access to collective resources. By a liberal elite, such costly developments were seen as "coercion of the [rich] minority, a violation of the liberty of individual taxpayers" (MacLean 2017, xxiv). While politicians could well be lobbied to support special interests, this strategy ultimately tended to be thwarted by that cumbersome democratic burden of majority rule, especially after suffrage was extended to women and people of color. "Faced with majority opinion as expressed in votes, politicians could not be counted on to stand by their stated commitments. Even those who previously had pledged fealty to state sovereignty, individual liberty, and free enterprise would buckle, owing to their self-interest in reelection" (71). Note the analogy to the military motivation for the initiation of the Stealth project (outlined in chapter 3): there, a fundamental change of military strategy was necessary because the Soviet troops and arsenal outnumbered those on the American side. Here, analogously, the libertarian movement saw itself in a "numerical minority" that had to be protected "against 'exploitation' by majorities of their fellow citizen" (MacLean 2017, 3, 2): "'Since we are greatly outnumbered,' [Charles] Koch conceded to the

assembled team, the movement could not win simply by persuasion. Instead, the cause's insiders had to use their knowledge of 'the rules of the game'—that game being how modern democratic governance works—'to create winning strategies.'" (MacLean 2017, xxii). Not unlike Leibniz's game of the world (discussed in chapter 4), the radical libertarian movement began looking for the more obscure principles of political process to inflect the workings of democratic governance in its favor. Initially, then, the radical liberal movement withdrew from its direct involvement in representational politics and invested secrecy as a political strategy. Indeed, for the libertarian project to succeed, James Buchanan stressed in a speech held in front of a group of early confidants, "conspiratorial secrecy is at all times essential" (117).

After this important strategy shift, Buchanan and Charles Koch thus set out to build an "effective counterintelligentsia" that would be able to slowly but steadily convert public opinion (116). More important, this group would have to be well organized and fully dedicated to the cause. For this purpose, Charles Koch and the economist Murray Rothbard in particular relied on the writings of Vladimir Lenin:

> You cannot understand the influence of the stealth movement that is transforming America today without understanding this critical turning point. "We came to realize," Rothbard later reminisced, "that, as the Marxian groups had discovered in the past, a cadre with no organization and with no continuous program of 'internal education' and reinforcement is bound to defect and melt away in the course of working with far stronger allies." Training was crucial so that the cadre's members could "make strong and fruitful alliances" with partners who might at the time of the alliance be stronger than the cadre without fear of the cadre's going over to the temporary ally. (MacLean 2017, 141)

A relatively small but very loyal cadre networked through existing libertarian organizations like the Institute for Humane Studies, as well as newly founded ones such as the Cato Institute and the Reason Foundation, would have to lead the cause toward success. This cadre based in newly emerging think tanks went on to produce a body of research—based on thought experiments more often than empirical studies—that provided small-state advocates with scientific credentials and influenced the policies of Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's governments. Further instructed by Lenin, this network understood that meaningful change would not come from the transparent elaboration and defense of its worldview in general. It became clear that a more efficient strategy consisted in introducing minor policy changes in a

piecemeal fashion "by privatizing one function after the other, selling each move as justified for its own sake rather than waiting until the majority of the population is convinced of the case for a libertarian utopia," as Robert W. Poole Jr., cofounder of the Reason Foundation, put it (MacLean 2017, 144).

Finally, this reliance on minor interventions by an opaque network also allowed the growing movement, which soon labeled itself "neoliberal," to strategically shift its alliances with major social groups and political parties. These shifty arrangements with majoritarian groups are made in the interest of managing appearances that introduce neoliberal policy behind smokescreens of changing social and political causes. For example, MacLean points out that libertarians initially targeted young urban professionals and catered their rhetoric to their presumed lifestyle: "In that early purity, [the] Cato [Institute] often shocked the nation's conservatives, as when it criticized American military intervention in other countries and called for legalizing drugs, prostitution, and other consensual sex. That unique stance, its first president said, made it 'the think tank for yuppies'—those who liked social freedom with their economic liberty, and never caught on to where all this was headed" (2017, 142).

This allegiance has waned and, especially since 2008, been replaced by a thorough investment in conservative grassroots movements. Ultimately, these efforts enabled what MacLean refers to as the "Koch team's most important stealth move": the transformation and take-over of the Republican party (2017, xxix). While ostentatiously catering to racist, antimigrant, Islamophobic, and transphobic sentiment under the guise of a populist agenda, President Donald Trump's arguably most important domestic policy change consists in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, which delivers significant benefits to the wealthiest households, thus serving the neoliberal and libertarian agendas. The crucial point here, however, is the ways in which that economic agenda has strategically changed how it appears in public to draw support from people of various sociopolitical convictions. Political discourse becomes a matter of appearances as the renewed discussions around fake news, disinformation, and propaganda indicate. This strategic use of political issues as a front for economic transformation is partly what Wendy Brown refers to as "neoliberalism's hollowing out of contemporary liberal democracy" (2015, 17).

More important, however, Brown emphasizes that the insinuation of economic logic into political discourse results in the changed valence of certain political concepts themselves. Take the notion of *liberty,* for instance. In a

social democratic tradition, the notion of liberty usually refers to the freedom from oppressive social hierarchies, and thus domination of one social group by another. Consider Murray Bookchin's definition of political freedom as "the equality of unequals" (1982, 9). Following this view, freedom—for all, that is—is achieved through "a freely given, unreflective form of social behavior and distribution that compensates inequalities and does not yield to the fictive claim, yet to be articulated, that everyone is equal" (9). Here, freedom is the freedom *to* participate in society, regardless of one's socioeconomic standing. Such a definition, which explicitly formulates equality as a goal to be achieved, also presumes a willingness of the individual to contribute to society. This is anathema to neoliberal reasoning which, in its most forceful articulations, denies the very existence of such a thing as society. Yet, liberty is of course crucial to neoliberalism. James Buchanan, one of the architects of neoliberal thought, defended freedom in the following way, as related by MacLean:

> "I want a society where nobody has power over the other," Buchanan told an interviewer early in the new century. "I don't want to control you and I don't want to be controlled by you." It sounds so reasonable, fair, and appealing. But the story told here will show that the last part of that statement is by far the most telling. This cause defines the "you" its members do not want to be controlled by as the majority of the American people. And its architects have never recognized economic power as a potential tool of domination: to them, unrestrained capitalism *is* freedom. (2017: xxxiv)

Here, liberty becomes the freedom *from* any social obligation toward fellow citizens, grounded in neoliberalism's well-known emphasis on the individual and its rights and responsibilities. This allows neoliberal rhetoric to affirm foundational concepts of democratic political thought while bending their semantics to serve its own agenda. The result is an ingenious twist by which any "coerced" contribution to society, for instance in the form of taxes, becomes an infringement on the individual's freedom and self-determination. Thus, "as the province and meaning of liberty and equality are recalibrated from political to economic, political power comes to be figured as their enemy, an interference with both" (Brown 2015, 42). In this way, the neoliberal agenda succeeds in both "eviscerating the democratic imaginary" and remaining relatively "illegible" while doing so (28, 38).

As previously mentioned, the foregoing account of neoliberalism's "stealth revolution" is not meant to provide an adequate account of neoliberalism itself. Its purpose was to demonstrate that general sociopolitical

transformations analogous to those which, according to Benjamin, led to the emergence of the Baroque aesthetic of the seventeenth century can also be observed in the recent past. Those sociopolitical transformations are not mainly concerned with economic policy, but rather with the more general reliance of political culture on the management of perceptions, the virtuoso modulation of appearances, and the harnessing of opaque principles as techniques for achieving undisclosed goals. Similarly, then, the aesthetics of stealth articulate an understanding of contemporary political culture. To further establish this link between media aesthetics and the politics of stealth, the following chapters return to TV shows, digital games, and video art that are preoccupied with strategic appearance and concealment.

6 Sneaking Stealth: The Tracking Shot and Relational Imperceptibility

A Contemporary Tracking Shot

The TV series *True Detective* sports a much-discussed six-minute tracking shot, in which cop Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) accomplishes a double escape from both the criminal gang that he investigates without authorization and his police colleagues who might find out about his rogue investigation (Pizzolatto 2014). For five minutes and fifty-four seconds, the camera moves behind and around a body that is precariously placed within an urban battle zone. As the fronts multiply to include opposing gangs and the police, Cohle, whose affiliations to these fronts are temporarily broken, must evade all of them.

This sequence is remarkable for a number of related reasons. First, it stands out for its technical and aesthetic virtuosity. *True Detective*'s tracking shot stands in a long tradition of carefully composed "unbroken shots" that combine a tracking camera movement and the duration of the long take, a tradition that spans from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) over Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) and Brian de Palma's *Snake Eyes* (1988) all the way to Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008) and Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013). In fact, the single-take movie in the tradition of *Rope* has made a noteworthy return in recent years, with films like Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), Alejandro Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2013) and Sebastian Schipper's *Victoria* (2015), to name only a few (see Gibbs and Pye 2017). In all these examples, the long-take tracking shot requires an extraordinarily complex orchestration of all elements of production, including camera movement, sound recording, changing lighting conditions, and, of course, the actors' performance. All these components must be perfectly attuned to each other. For this reason,

this chapter will first suggest, the long-take tracking shot can be said to facilitate the composition of an aesthetic milieu.

More specifically, *True Detective*'s tracking shot is closely tied to the protagonist's body and moves with him through the associated aesthetic milieu. As a result, the abovementioned virtuosity of the successful tracking shot is experienced as the extraordinary skill of Rust Cohle. This particular type of tracking shot participates in a modification of the figure of the TV detective: no longer an uninvolved outside observer who reestablishes social order by means of forensic investigation and rationality, the detective is utterly entangled in a complex social field whose management puts his own existence at stake. The mode of action to be favored in a situation thus changed is that of stealth, furtive action that is efficient mainly because it remains imperceptible. The contemporary detective no longer seeks open confrontation with his opponent in a clear-cut distribution of the "good" upholder of the law and the "bad" criminal. Rather, the stealth detective accomplishes their mission by acting below the threshold of the perceptible and beyond the rule of law. In that, contemporary law enforcers—at least as the media imagine them—are suspiciously close to criminals. This ethico-aesthetic shift of the detective figure, this chapter will argue, astutely renders an aspect of contemporary political culture that the political scientists John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse have called "stealth democracy," a term that indicates the "support for business-type approaches to governing" that should be accountable on demand but need not operate publicly or transparently otherwise (2002, 138). As suggested in the previous interlude, such an attitude supports an approach to political action that considers democratic practice as an inconvenient but necessary facade that must be upheld but may be neglected when one isn't publicly scrutinized.

And finally, the scene is remarkable because it imports into television the aesthetics of third-person video games. *True Detective*'s long tracking shot is clearly informed by the aesthetics of the third-person action-adventure and, more specifically, the stealth game. To trace this lineage, this chapter first sets out to establish some general aesthetic features of the stealth action-adventure. By first looking at the video game series *Splinter Cell* (Ubisoft 2002–2013) and then comparing it to the televisiual tracking shot from *True Detective*, it will become clear that the securitizing secrecy of stealth is an aesthetic trend that works across media and art practices. To further establish this point, the argument will conclude by looking at Hito Steyerl's single-channel

video "Guards" (2012), which addresses the militarization of everyday life and art institutions in particular, also by means of tracking shots.

Third-Person Point of View and Associated Milieus: *Splinter Cell*

The *Splinter Cell* series consists of seven video games and seven novels, all published between 2002 and 2013. The series protagonist, Sam Fisher, is an elite agent within a black-ops division of the National Security Agency (NSA) called "Third Echelon." In the first novel from the series, *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, Fisher describes his occupation as follows:

> Third Echelon agents are called Splinter Cells, and I was the very first one. We physically infiltrate dangerous and sensitive enemy locations to gather the required intelligence by whatever means necessary. Our prime directive, in a nutshell, is to do our jobs while remaining invisible to the public eye. We're authorized to work outside the boundaries of international treaties, but the U.S. will neither acknowledge nor support our operations. / Thus, Third Echelon, a sub-agency of the NSA, consists of an elite team of strategists, hackers, and field operatives. We respond to crises of information warfare—a war that is hidden from the media and the ordinary man on the street. You're not going to see our battles on CNN. (Michaels 2004, 58)

Third Echelon's agents are called "splinter cells" "because they work alone and undercover. Their own government pretends they don't exist" (Michaels 2004, 120). In this way, the series introduces secretive physical infiltration into the context of contemporary information warfare and the fight against terrorism. This premise of the story also provides the main directives for the gameplay and aesthetics of *Splinter Cell*. The core mechanics of this "sneaking stealth" enable the player to accomplish infiltration missions without being detected by enemy forces: the player has to move through and create shadows (by disabling light sources), distract and lure enemies, perform silent takedowns, hide bodies, and find secret passages, among other things. As chapter 9 will explore in more detail, this also means that stealth gameplay is ideally nonconfrontational and potentially entirely "nonlethal."

But how is all this action presented to the player? The interface of all *Splinter Cell* games presents the action in what is called "third-person point of view," which means that the image renders a point of view usually behind the avatar (Nitsche 2008, 93). When the player moves their avatar through the game world, the "virtual camera" follows it through the space at a more

or less fixed distance. This is why Michael Nitsche refers to this third-person point of view as the "following camera" (93). In cinematographic terms, then, most third-person 3D action-adventures present the game action by means of a continuous tracking shot. This manner of establishing point of view is used in most contemporary blockbuster 3D action-adventures, including the main entries in the *Tomb Raider*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Batman: Arkham*, *Uncharted*, and *Assassin's Creed* series. So the third-person point of view is by no means exclusive to stealth games. And to be sure, there are also stealth games in "first-person point of view," such as the games in the *Thief*, *Deus Ex,* and *Dishonored* series. In the first-person point of view, the image renders the visual field of the fictional character that the player controls. Thus, camera movement corresponds to the avatar's turning of the head and directional movements. In addition, the image conventionally shows the avatar's hands at the left and right bottom of the screens, which also indicates the weapon that is currently equipped by the avatar. Chapter 9 looks at *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* as an example of first-person stealth adventures. In this chapter, however, the emphasis is on the third-person point of view for two argumentative reasons. First, the third-person point of view is the video game convention that *True Detective* picks up to create its unbroken tracking shot. It is one of the techniques that allows the aesthetics of stealth to wander across media forms. And second, it clarifies that stealth is an ecological approach to power that works through the modulation of an associated aesthetic milieu.

In this regard, the third-person point of view is crucial because it tethers the camera to the avatar and, at the same time, allows the player to explore the surrounding game space. While the distance between the avatar and the camera position is relatively fixed, the position and angle of the camera are not. The player can freely circle the camera around the avatar to scan and analyze the surroundings. As they move both the avatar *and* the camera,[1] the player engages in what Michael Nitsche calls a "double exploration" of the game space: "as hero and as detached camera operator" (2008, 98). While this formulation is technically correct, and even though inexperienced players will find the required coordination of their thumbs challenging, in more advanced gamers, these two separate movements of avatar and camera experientially fuse into one complex exploration of the environment *in relation to* the avatar. This aspect is crucial to the stealth tracking shot as it is theorized here: it does not foreground the two separate elements—avatar and game space—that must be considered and navigated simultaneously; rather,

Figure 6.1
Third-person point of view in *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* (Ubisoft Toronto 2013). The following camera is placed behind a crouching Sam Fisher.

it emphasizes the shifting relational field that these elements cocompose. To put it in the terms introduced in chapters 2–4, the third-person point of view in *Splinter Cell* renders an aesthetic experience of what an prehensive or event ecology is for a particular entity in that ecology: the avatar. One could say, then, that the third-person point of view articulates the avatar's perspective of the universe because it allows for the exploration of "what the universe is for" the avatar (Whitehead 1968, 66).

To substantiate these ideas, consider a playthrough of the mission "Border Crossing" from the game *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* (Ubisoft Toronto 2013).[2] This mission tasks the player to obtain three intel files without being detected. In this particular side mission of the game, detection will lead to an "automatic fail" and respawn the player at the beginning of the mission. This means that the player has to adopt a particular play style of "pure stealth" or what the game refers to as "Ghost" mode: the player remains undetected and bypasses enemies entirely.[3] Indeed, higher mission scores are awarded for leaving enemy guards completely untouched. In the mission "Border Crossing," this leads to a suspenseful calmness of the gameplay: there are no gunshots, bomb explosions, or any other noise of force-on-force combat. Instead of seeking open confrontation, the player calmly analyzes the game space as a material

and perceptual ecology by repeatedly circling the camera around the stealth agent. This process of situating the avatar in its milieu not only involves the parsing of the space into, say, cover spots, but also an attunement to the position of enemy guards, the direction they look in, their movement patterns, and perceptual abilities (e.g., usually snipers are more perceptive than regular guards, who have smaller vision cones). All these factors need to be considered to find openings in the perceptual field, or what J. J. Gibson would call *affordances*, that is, relational potentials or potential relations, for staying out of sight (2015, 119–135).[4] Before the avatar enters the back of the truck, the player has to perfectly time the short interval in which the four enemy posts, including one sniper, are *not* looking at the truck. This moment is the player's affordance for stealth. They *barely* succeed: the detection warning—a white arrow that points in the direction of the guard that sees them, accompanied by a shrill sound—indicates that the sniper on the roof has *almost* identified a hostile individual on the premises.[5] A small sensory prickling of the avatar's presence has almost constituted a macroperception. Stealth gameplay turns around this "almost" of perception. To accomplish the mission, one must very well expose oneself to the risk of detection. But one must do it in such a way as to remain *just* under the threshold of the perceptible.

As the video shows, the openings for stealth are constantly shifting in relation to the changing perceptual ecology (i.e., enemy movement, changing sightlines, etc.). Accordingly, every moment of continued individuation through the surrounding game space must be composed *with* that immediate environment, the associated milieu. The remainder of the walkthrough video gives an indication of the level of complexity that such a milieu can attain: in addition to various human enemies with a range of perceptual abilities, the player encounters surveillance cameras, laser grids, land mines and—in other missions—guard dogs, all with their own sensory capacities. Indeed, the challenge that *Splinter Cell*'s missions articulate for the player can be thought as prehensive labyrinths in movement, as first suggested in chapter 4.

This example also already shows that "pure stealth" challenges the player to consider windows of opportunity that are infinitesimally small, asymptotically approaching the perceptual thresholds of various other elements that compose the labyrinth. What will become clear in the following discussion is that finding a way out of this labyrinth cannot be a matter of simply making the avatar move against the environment and confront enemies. Rather, it is a matter of involution, that is, individuating by thoroughly involving oneself

in the perceptual ecology, of actively individuating with and through one's immediate surroundings by perceiving one's adversaries' perception and moving with or alongside their movements. This aspect of *withness*—the relationality that characterizes the individual's continued existence—is crucial.

When Gilbert Simondon proposed his concept of the "associated milieu," it was precisely to withdraw from the conception of a preconstituted individual who exists in an already defined, mechanical space and to foreground the "chrono-topological ensemble" that constitutes a more expansive and ecological process of individuation (2020, 160). There is thus a functional distinction between individual and individuation: "In a word, what is an individual? We respond to this question that we cannot rigorously speak of the individual but of individuation; we must come back to the activity, to the genesis, instead of attempting to grasp the fully formed being in order to discover the criteria by means of which we will know whether or not it is an individual. *The individual is not a being but an act, and the being is an individual as an agent of this act of individuation through which it appears and exists"* (Simondon 2020, 208–209; emphasis added). By foregrounding the process of individuation, Simondon also asks the reader to expand the scope of their inquiry: individuation comprises most obviously the individual being as a temporary result and an important, indispensable agent for the intensified continuation of process. But the process of individuation also requires the consideration of the attendant world because it coconstitutes the energetic system through which individuation occurs. Simondon refers to this "constituting energetic system" as the individual's associated milieu to underscore that it "should not be conceived as a new term that would be added onto matter [or the individual misconceived as an self-contained entity]: the milieu is the very activity of relation," which allows for the preservation of the unity of process (50). So the surrounding world is not an external resource that merely fuels the individual; it relationally composes and participates in the process of individuation.

Simondon is led to this view because he considers individuation "in light of the notions of form and information" and clearly gives precedence to the latter: "The notion of form must be replaced with that of information," with the latter also thought of as a process rather than an entity (16). Simondon defines information as follows: "Information, whether this be at the level of tropistic unity or at the level of the transindividual, is never deposited in a form that is able to be given; it is the tension between two disparate reals, it

is *the signification that will emerge when an operation of individuation will discover the dimension according to which two disparate reals can become a system; information is therefore an initiation of individuation, a requirement for individuation*, for the passage from the metastable to the stable, it is never a given thing" (Simondon, 2020: 11; emphasis in original, translation modified). Information, the energy differentially distributed across the milieu, prods individuation into a next metastable state. Information—understood as the "tension between disparate reals" that is bound to appear in a dynamic, open system—is an existential problem for individuation's unity of process and requires a resolution. It is a "difference that makes a difference," to hark back to Gregory Bateson's definition once more (2000, 315). To individuate is to engage one's environment as a relational field and integrate the energetic existential problems in such a way that individuation can continue. In this sense, what we call the "individual" is the temporary "expression of a resolution" found at a certain moment under the attending conditions (Simondon 2020, 52). But this resolution is not a straightforward dissolution of the tensions: "The resolving individuation is one that conserves the tensions in the equilibrium of metastability instead of nullifying them in the equilibrium of stability. Individuation makes tensions compatible but does not relax them; it discovers a system of structures and functions within which tensions are compatible" (Simondon 2020, 226). Considered as a process, then, information is the systemwide act of making compatible energetic tensions without resolving them. In a digital technical object, this in-formation of the associated milieu can lead to the object's concretization, as discussed in chapter 3. And surely, from the perspective of the game software *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*, every successfully accomplished stealth mission is a process of concretizing an artificially abstract algorithmic system toward one particular outcome.[6] Engaging with *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* is, analogous to what was said about *Watch Dogs: Legion* (WDL) in chapter 4, to creatively modulate the algorithmic logic of game software via its interface. It is to test the constraints, affordances, and reacitvity of complex digital procedures. This said, the perspective of this chapter is somewhat different. Here, the focus has shifted from the technical object to the human individual, especially with regard to their imagined participation in a political process. Importantly, technical and living individuation individuate differently, especially with regard to concretization. While technical objects are "never completely concrete" (Simondon 2017, 39; see chapter 3), "living beings are concrete to begin with. One mustn't confuse

the tendency toward concretization with the status of entirely concrete existence" (51).[7] This means that for a living individuating being, the act of making energetic tensions within the associated milieu compatible cannot be achieved through a transduction or reorganization of its internal distribution of functions. Instead, the living individual "condenses information, transports it, and then modulates a new milieu" (Simondon 2020, 209).

In this conception, then, it can be said that stealth gameplay composes for the continuous and active integration—a making-compatible—of tensions in an aesthetic milieu. The aesthetic feature that enables this process of individuation in *Splinter Cell*'s digital analog of stealth warfare is the tracking shot, tethered to the body of the avatar and yet mobile. First and foremost, the player perceives the variant and invariant energy gradients in the auditory and optic array (see chapter 4) that prevent them from individuating toward the goal formulated by the mission. Some of these gradients can then be modulated to no longer act as obstacles to the avatar's continued algorithmic individuation. The player can introduce new energy gradients into the simulated environment. For instance, the player can make the avatar Sam Fisher throw one of his gadgets, a so-called noisemaker, into the environment. Nonplayable enemy combatants within earshot will pick up on this sound, explore it, and thus be "lured" away from their regular movement and surveillance patterns. But the AI enemy might return to its regular movement pattern after exploring the area and finding nothing, not even the noisemaker. As chapter 10 explores in more detail, gaming AI is often artificially stupid or just unresponsive to make the software work properly as a game. And yet the more varied the enemy combatants are, the more complex the task of integrating the threatening tensions within the milieu without dissolving them into "Game over."

This implies that, in "total stealth" gameplay, one *becomes* one's AI enemies to a certain extent. This is not at all in the sense that one simply copies them or traces their movements. Rather, as in the video excerpt under study here, the player moves with and modulates the algorithmic enemies' movement to extract from this associated aesthetic milieu a contrapuntal movement that constitutes a possibility of digital survival.

It is this activity of making tensions compatible and moving into the next temporary affordance for imperceptibility only to encounter new or renewed tensions within the milieu that gives total stealth gameplay its lowly pulsating, joyful suspense. Stealth acquires this simmering intensity precisely

because adversarial tensions are integrated but not dissolved. In a shooter game or lethal stealth gameplay, these tensions could certainly be dissolved by "killing" the AI enemy. But, as Simondon teaches, "Only death would be the resolution of all tensions; and death is not the solution to any problem" (2020, 226). By contrast, total stealth must continuously reckon with these tensions while maintaining them in an integrated manner. Under such precarious conditions, the success or failure of stealth depends on the smallest deviations: just one miscalculated step, one badly timed move, and the entire perceptual ecology tips from imperceptibility into open confrontation (or a "mission abort" in the case of the present example) because one digital procedure has registered another one. To avoid this, the milieuwide vibrant attention of the stealth gamer encompasses the entire aesthetic milieu of the game space to find within it the microscopic opening for disappearance, the split second where the next vanishing act can occur. One could say that stealth gameplay is a bit like a virtuoso walk on a tightrope to the extent that both can be interrupted by just the smallest mistake. The difference is that, to avoid that mistake, stealth gameplay actually requires a lot of variable movement, course corrections, and detours. The particular aesthetic achievement of the third-person point of view in combination with the following camera is to enable this relational exploration of a process of individuation (including the individual and its associated aesthetic milieu), the aesthetic attunement toward smallest deviations, and the modulation of the environment to ensure continued individuation.

Stealth Democracy: *True Detective*

This desire to avoid smallest mistakes constitutes a parallel between the aesthetic of the stealth game and the televisual tracking shot in *True Detective*.[8] As was stated at the beginning, an extended tracking shot like the one in *True Detective* requires a concerted effort to integrate all elements of production. The smallest mistake will lead to a "cut," and the take will have to be repeated from the very beginning. Of course, many extraordinarily long one-takes are not actually shot continuously. Like Hitchcock's *Rope*, recent continuous takes have included moments of darkness or extreme close-ups of monochrome surfaces that allow an edit to go unnoticed; or they are largely animated, as in the case of *Gravity*'s opening scene. In all these cases, though, the aesthetic continuity of the shot is maintained across technical

discontinuities.[9] This is important for the one-take's aesthetic efficacy because it draws much of its suspense from this apparent capacity for perfect integration of maintained tensions. The holding of the same though mobile point of view for several minutes can create a variety of affective intensities relating to paranoia and imminent threat (*The Shining*), claustrophobia and the impossibility of escape (*Children of Men*), or commanding force and power (*Goodfellas*). The suspense of *True Detective*'s tracking shot arises, much like a successful walkthrough in a stealth game, from the continued individuation of the protagonist through an overwhelmingly complex environment and a cascade of adverse events.

The unbroken sequence begins as an attempted robbery. The Iron Crusaders, led by gang member Ginger and Rust Cohle in an unauthorized undercover operation, want to rob the members of a rival gang. However, the robbery soon turns into an open shoot-out. When the cops arrive, chaos breaks loose. Cohle is in a most precarious situation: both the rival gang and the police want his neck, the latter for his unauthorized policing methods. To escape with valuable information, he decides to blow his cover with the Iron Crusaders and takes Ginger prisoner. His task is now to subdue his captive, who tries to escape from Cohle's escape, and evade the two rival gangs as well as the cops. Aesthetically, this sequence is rendered through a tracking shot that is tethered to Cohle's body in the same way that the camera of a third-person stealth game follows its avatar. Although the camera is allowed a somewhat wider range of distance from the protagonist than in *Splinter Cell*, Cohle is clearly the center around which the camera revolves as he moves through space. Indeed, the camera freely circles around Cohle to reveal elements of interest such as approaching enemies, a police helicopter, and potential escape routes. More important, the chain of events that is presented borrows many elements from video game action, especially in the latter half of the sequence, beginning after Cohle has spoken to his partner Marty on the phone. The influence of video game aesthetics is evident in moments where Cohle has to fend off individual enemies through a combination of dodge/counter/strike, run after Ginger with an urgency reminiscent of tailing or chasing missions and their "Reduce distance to target" warnings, and take cover and hide behind bushes to wait until the threat of a police squad has passed. Like the stealth agent whose existence is denied even by their own government, Cohle's survival strategy is to make tactical use of a complex perceptual and political ecology to find openings for imperceptibility.

The most important aesthetic difference between stealth gameplay as discussed earlier in this chapter and *True Detective*'s tracking shot consists in the divergent speeds and levels of noise that allow the protagonist to disappear. Stealth gameplay can be extraordinarily slow and silent. For example, consider the long periods of waiting necessary to proceed undetected in the excerpt from *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*; recall the suspense that emerges from the desire to avoid any kind of noise to the point that even the detection warning seems like an unwelcome, startling intrusion. In *True Detective*, this overall calmness and slowness of stealth gameplay are eschewed in favor of an audiovisual attack on the senses. This is mainly achieved by the sonic environment that the sequence creates without establishing a sense of order or orientation. The viewer's sonic orientation is disrupted at the same time as Cohle's when gunshots are fired in the small projects bungalow and the soundtrack is taken over by a high-pitched ringing. When Cohle's and the viewer's hearing returns, it is assaulted by screams, sirens, and vehicle noise. In addition to this sonic disorder, the viewer is further disoriented by a camera whose movement they cannot control. Instead of following a clear trajectory, the camera erratically jerks into any direction from which light and sound assail. This happens, for instance, once the police helicopter can be heard and its searchlights enter the frame: the camera pans up and we briefly lose track of the individual that anchors the shot. In short, whereas the following camera in stealth video games suggests imperceptibility through a tentative, relational movement with the surroundings, the tracking shot in *True Detective* makes the individual disappear into a sea of noise. (This is a pattern of televisual stealth: Recall that the opening scene of *The Americans* also makes the target's stealthy action-perception disappear into ambient noise.) This aesthetic difference is immediately ethico-political in two major respects. The first concerns the ethical potential of the long tracking shot itself, while the second is relevant to the figure of the contemporary detective more generally.

In the essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," André Bazin suggests that the long take might have a particular potential to activate viewers and foster in them a simultaneously more dispersed and more focused mode of attention:

> [The long take or *plan-séquence*] affects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image, and in consequence it influences the interpretation of the spectacle. . . . it implies, consequently, both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in

> progress. While analytical montage only calls for him to follow his guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives. (Bazin 2005, 35–36)

An uninterrupted shot activates the viewer because it encourages them to freely roam the image in surface and in depth, as well as to focus on elements that speak to their own interests. No shot/reverse shot nudges them into following the conversation between two characters; no close-up of a particular object patronizingly suggests "Pay attention! This will be important later on." There is an ethics to this aesthetic because, instead of prescribing meaning as montage would, the long take gives both freedom and responsibility to choose how one might be concerned by the image.

One cannot simply transpose this argument about the films of Orson Welles and Jean Renoir to the context of contemporary media. The relevance of Bazin's observations to the present account does not lie in their applicability to the following camera in video games or the tracking shot in *True Detective,* but rather in the productive tension between these technically related procedures. If Bazin suggests that the long take liberates the viewer from the predetermination of meaning through editing, surely this is no longer the case in *True Detective*. It is impossible to calmly assess the various components of the image and linger on those that one might find of interest. The reasons for this difficulty lie partly in the mobility and speed of the camera and partly in the fact that the long take is indexed to one particular body within the frame. So instead of the editor, it is the camera operator and the protagonist of the sequence who restrict the viewer's freedom of choice. But none of this diminishes the ethical stakes of this sequence. Rather, the tension between Bazin's concept and *True Detective*'s percept discharges into a reconsideration of what can count as an ethics for our time. For Bazin, the ethical achievement of the long take is to give the viewer agency as the outside observer of a mostly static frame filmed in depth. In today's mobile long takes, there is no outside. Nor is there, strictly speaking, individual agency. The contemporary tracking shot foregrounds ecology and assemblage, individuation rather than the individual. The focus is on a Simondonian making-compatible of tensions to create an existential line of flight for protagonists, avatars, and viewers.[10]

This concern can be articulated at various speeds: it can be slow, as in *Splinter Cell,* or fast, as in *True Detective*. In either case, it is an ethics that is

no longer based on reflective judgment according to a predetermined moral standard, but one that works through immanent criteria and requires that one adapt one's capacities to affect and to be affected in such a way as to create possibilities of life (Deleuze 1988, 17–29). *True Detective* suggests by way of plot development that if Rust Cohle had adhered to the moral and professional standards of the police, his crime investigation would have been unsuccessful (and the scene discussed here might never have occurred). A code of conduct formulates the sanctioned rules and methods by which law enforcement officials are allowed to proceed but, the series suggests, the very strictness of those rules may curtail the investigators' efficacy. *True Detective* proposes alternatively that to achieve justice, appropriate modes of moving and behaving need to be continuously (re)invented in relation to a given situation. Establishing "the right thing to do" is always a relational practice; the proposed solution is always provisional. *True Detective*'s tracking shot articulates this aesthetically by placing a vulnerable individual in a highly complex, threatening environment and by highlighting the multiple and changing requirements for survival through the mobile camera circling around the individual. In this way, the series performs an ethics on the fly for what Gilles Deleuze calls the "control society," in which the conditions for appropriate participation and intervention constantly shift (1995, 177–182).

This changed notion of ethics becomes clearer with regard to the figure of the detective articulated in this sequence, and in *True Detective* more generally. Rust Cohle belongs to a group of recent detectives in televisual crime fiction whose commitment to the conventional values of transparency, accountability, and objectivity is questionable. A considerable number of contemporary TV criminal investigators—including characters like Dexter, Carrie Mathison, and Saga Norén—stand out for being so utterly involved in the complex reality of their cases that they are no longer able to objectively assess a situation as a rational, external observer.[11] Moreover, their outstanding intelligence borders on madness and they disrespect chains of command and protocol.[12] It would be wrong to interpret this trend as the failure and decline of the detective on TV, for at the same time, these characters are utterly efficacious. Indeed, they are often presented as the only ones who are paranoid enough to perceive reality appropriately and unconventional enough to mete out justice. This type of detective—involved and irrational—is a reworking of the figure to the context of the control society and its increased complexity.

Morally flexible detectives are able to insert themselves into a changed ecology of powers.[13]

This transformation of the detective figure also produces a shift in the "distribution of the sensible" that the detective conventionally articulates (Rancière 2010, 36). The detective is no longer the one who makes the obscure domains of society transparent, who observes and logically deduces a preexisting, verifiable truth from the available factual evidence to reestablish social order (Thomas 1995). Here, the detective enters the opacity of criminality and produces negative prehensions of their own existence to create new realities. The police detective becomes a *stealth agent*. This mediated distribution of the sensible and its figure of the stealth agent also strike at the core of predominant Western discourses of democratic process. Such discourses conventionally imagine the political sphere as one in which citizens of the state or their representatives communicate rationally and deliberate on their various agendas with the aim of arriving at a viable consensus. This understanding relies on a number of concepts that have shaped modern political thought: Citizens *appear* as *subjects* with certain rights and duties; they are *represented* by their members of parliament who are *accountable* to the electorate; politics fundamentally relies on the human faculty of *reason*.[14] Law enforcement and the judiciary are to support this understanding of democratic political process. Following Simondon, this model and its distribution of the sensible are a transindividual invention that aims at organizing the collective individuation of people. Analogously to the individual's making-compatible of tensions in their associated milieu, "transindividual action is what makes it such that individuals exist together as the elements of a system that contains potentials and metastability, expectation and tension, then the discovery of a structure and of a functional organization that integrate and resolve this problematic of incorporated immanence" (Simondon 2020, 339). Thus, representational democracies and their social contracts are attempts to functionally integrate interindividual tensions toward functional collective individuation by means of a normatively transparent and institutionally fixed organization of political activity according to the conceptual grid of reason–subject–identity–representation–accountability. It works well enough for some, but it has serious practical limitations. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney teach, the main function of so-called social contracts as invented in early modern Europe and later is to exempt propertied white males from

the antisocial, brutally extractivist behavior that they force upon "women, slaves, peasants, beasts, [and] the earth itself" (2021, 34). From the beginning, then, social contracts are "(anti)social contract[s]" because they integrate tensions for a few and externalize the costs to others (32–35). And as the Western lifestyle of accumulation that is grounded in such contracts encounters new limits to extraction and externalization, fewer and fewer enjoy the (anti)social privileges ordained by them.

That is to say that, for many, much of social and political life takes place beyond the purview of normative democratic ideals. The "hollowing out of contemporary liberal democracy" by neoliberal stealth, discussed in chapter 5, can serve as a concrete example of this, also because it shows that the very institutional framework supposed to order *collective* individuation becomes a plaything to be furtively modulated in one's own best interest (Brown 2015, 17). Further recent examples could include governments that—potentially illegally[15]—bypass parliaments (and dissensus) to authorize airstrikes on foreign territory, wars that are fought by private "security services companies," and opaque surveillance networks that span entire regions of the world. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many national parliaments felt sidelined by their leaders' administrations, which restricted personal freedom by executive order. In practice, then, politics is not always a matter of parliamentary deliberation, transparency, and consensus-building.

But it is just as insightful that activist movements of recent years have also contested the viability of normative strategies that focus on creating visibility and affirming one's identity. Consider as an example the various incarnations of the Occupy Movement across the globe, many of which actively resisted the injunction leveled at them by public officials to "voice their demands." Or think of the activist network Anonymous, which announced its own clandestine cyberwar against the perpetrators of the Paris attacks on November 13, 2015, uncomfortably introducing itself as a third front between ISIS and Western governments. Collectives such as Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee provide the manifestoes and theories behind these retreats from conventional democratic practice. "The new mantra is: we have no demands. We don't want political representation. We don't want collective bargaining. We don't want a seat at the table" (Galloway 2011, 244). The mode of political action that gains traction across the political spectrum is one that challenges the conceptual lineage of reason–subject–identity–representation–accountability that grounds many discourses of democracy and activism. At

the same time, it challenges the widespread assumption, already questioned by Peggy Phelan more than two decades ago, that "greater visibility of the hitherto underrepresented leads to enhanced political power" (1993, 2). In fact, the politics of visibility and representation may well be a trap (Morris 2012, 106–110), one that consists in integrating individual tendencies and desires for change into a normative system to neutralize them.

Considering these convergent interests in imperceptibility from across the political spectrum (from right to left) and across modes of political action (from grassroots to Big Politics) and from both sides of the law (law enforcement and criminality), the stealth agent is an aesthetic figure—perhaps even a psychosocial type—in which contemporary political culture crystallizes some of its operational principles: Across various media, the stealth agent lithely prowls ahead toward their strategic goal, skillfully sweeping underneath that laser beam, furtively manipulating the surrounding world to their advantage, and tactically evading normative exclusion, as well as imminent apprehension, at every turn. The stealth agent encounters normative boundaries not to respect but to inflect them. That is, so-called normative political frameworks are reframed from the outside as just one more ordering mechanism of the social environment that needs to be taken into account and fitted into a larger power formation. In the terms of the political scientists John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, this attitude toward political action could be described as "stealth democracy," a notion that refers to the widespread popular "support for business-type approaches to governing or for turning authority over to something as amorphous and unaccountable as 'nonelected, independent experts'" (138). In their empirical research, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found that considerable parts of the US population think that most politicians are self-interested, that parliamentary debates inflate conflicts and, at the same time, lead to foul compromises (2002, 130–137). So far, so familiar. Among the researchers' more surprising findings is that the people wants anything but a shift of power toward them, the people. They want politicians to do their job, but without all the public spectacle. In this way, the rationale goes, bipartisan quarreling—aka parliamentary deliberation—could be avoided and problems could get solved more pragmatically and efficiently. The government should be "visible, accountable, and representative" *on demand*, but may operate in opacity so long as it does its job properly (2). Indeed, such a political culture is one that makes space for stealth in a way that puts the very notion of democracy under

pressure. If "stealth democracy" is to be an insightful analytical notion, its explanation of the normative desires within a populace needs to be complemented with the caveat that the desired vision is near-impossible in practice. From the very outset, a politics in the mode of stealth dismissively treats legal frameworks and normative constraints as creative challenges to be furtively circumvented. This includes standard practices of accountability and representation that themselves can be modulated into exercises in rhetoric, information management, and plausible deniability.

The stealth agent, aesthetically rendered through the tracking shot, both represents and performs this political culture. *Splinter Cell*'s Sam Fisher may be hired by the government, but he is relieved of any accountability. His very existence will be denied to give him the executive freedom necessary to get the job done. *True Detective*'s protagonist effectively acts as a third party that lithely moves between the police and organized crime, not against but already beyond the law. Renouncing transparency and accountability, he proceeds in darkness to produce results that none of his law-abiding colleagues can deliver. In the process, crime and law enforcement become indistinguishable. Rust Cohle is a detective for the control society, the hero of stealth "democracy." This correlation of the blurry lines between crime and lawfulness on the one hand and the character's flexibility and responsiveness to the surroundings on the other hand are not coincidental.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault had already argued that "the anthropological erasure of the criminal" (in favor of an interpretation of crime according to economic criteria such as risk, benefit, and productivity) ultimately leads to politics as an ecological or "environmental type of intervention," of which stealth is an example (2008, 258–260). Stealth is environmental because, instead of accepting the public sphere as a normative container environment for legitimate political action, it continuously modulates a larger existential environment to enable illicit modes of political action that go unnoticed. The stealth tracking shot as described in this chapter performs this new political sphere aesthetically as it takes perception into an aesthetic milieu and articulates situated modulations of the environment as the way to safety and securitization. Snaking its way through clearly articulated fronts, the tracking shot shows that the stealth agent's imperceptibility is what ensures their political efficacy. Through the figure of the stealth agent and the aesthetic technique of the tracking shot, then, the aesthetics of

stealth also attune audiences to this political culture. Stealth media encourage us to believe in the efficacy of obscure politics.

Stealth in the Museum: "Guards"

The stealth agent is such a potent aesthetic figure also because of its duplicity: The stealth agent is both hero and enemy. Savior and terrorist. High-echelon operative and anarchist vigilante. An outside-the-box-thinking manager type who gets stuff done and a sleeper agent. As will shortly be seen in more detail, this duplicity also allows stealth to appear simultaneously as both the problem and the solution. Take discourses of securitization, which evoke diffuse and imperceptible threats to legitimate public support and political investment in intelligence services and the militarization of policing. Hito Steyerl's 2012 single-channel video "Guards" investigates the ways in which securitization of the environment by means of stealth has become a modus operandi of art institutions themselves. Museums and galleries have become high-security areas partly because they hold valuable cultural assets and participate in economic circuits of impressive magnitudes.[16] This means that security personnel are no longer only there to prevent the occasional misbehavior of a visitor who might want to touch an artwork or carry food items through an exhibition. Their mandate presently includes the prevention of concerted acts of vandalism and potential attacks on the visiting public. In other words, museum security approaches its site of operation as a complex battle zone. This is how, according to Steyerl, the art world is thoroughly entangled with current developments toward the militarization of the civilian public sphere and what is here theorized as an aesthetic of stealth.

Focusing on two private security professionals with a military background working at the Art Institute of Chicago, "Guards" explores the extent to which the privatization of military services has infiltrated institutions of everyday leisure and education. It is worth noting that "Guards" provides an interesting shift in perspective compared to the examples previously discussed in this chapter. While *Splinter Cell* and *True Detective* made the audience look *at* enemy guards from the perspective of the infiltrators Sam Fisher and Rust Cohle, "Guards" presents the perspective of those who enforce the politico-aesthetic order under threat of infiltration. The point here is, however, that this "view from the other side" is surprisingly similar to the one previously

established in this chapter. That is, the guards' approach to their aesthetic milieu follows a mode of operation that is analog to that of the stealth agent.

"Guards" begins on a black screen that shows only the piece's title, accompanied by the sound of slow, measured footsteps. The result of this opening is a playful confusion, as gallery visitors cannot be sure whether the sounds of these unseen, roaming feet come from the speakers of the video setup or from the very gallery space they find themselves in. Visitors may turn their heads to make sure that nobody is approaching them from behind. Thus, as the video temporarily blurs the boundary between the gallery visitors' own surroundings and the representational space of the video, their spatial awareness heightens and they are bound to think the video's subject matter through their own embodied relation to the gallery space. By way of this auditory trick at the beginning of "Guards," the immediate environment of the gallery visitor is directly concerned by the video's project. This effect is further increased by the fact that the video, with its unusual portrait orientation, is shown on a freestanding screen. At Steyerl's gallery show "Left to Our Own Devices" at KOW Berlin (September 17 to December 5, 2015), the screen was placed in a darkened corner of the gallery, which gave the piece itself an obscure and impervious environment.

The opacity of the museum space is also the concern of the security agents that "Guards" presents. In their account, the museum becomes a zone of potential threat and combat not unlike the spaces of *Splinter Cell* and *True Detective*: "So as I walk through this space and try and determine security aspects of it, some things I keep in mind is the actual setup of the room: points of view, lines of sight. What are the advantages that we can take in terms of the space, the use of the space?" (Steyerl, 2012). In other words, the museum has become a perceptual ecology that is animated by the same aesthetic components as those of the stealth game space and tracking shot discussed earlier: vantage points, lines of sight, and potential cover spots must be considered relationally and in movement. Through this particular staging of the museum, Steyerl makes the visitor reconsider the aesthetic conventions of the museum space, for, while perspectives and vantage points have preoccupied gallerists and curators since the inception of their respective institutions, and despite the important relational efforts of museum architects and curators, many museums and galleries still invite a mode of contemplation that stills the spectator's gaze. This is particularly important for the consumption of artificially perspectival art, which pulls the spectator to

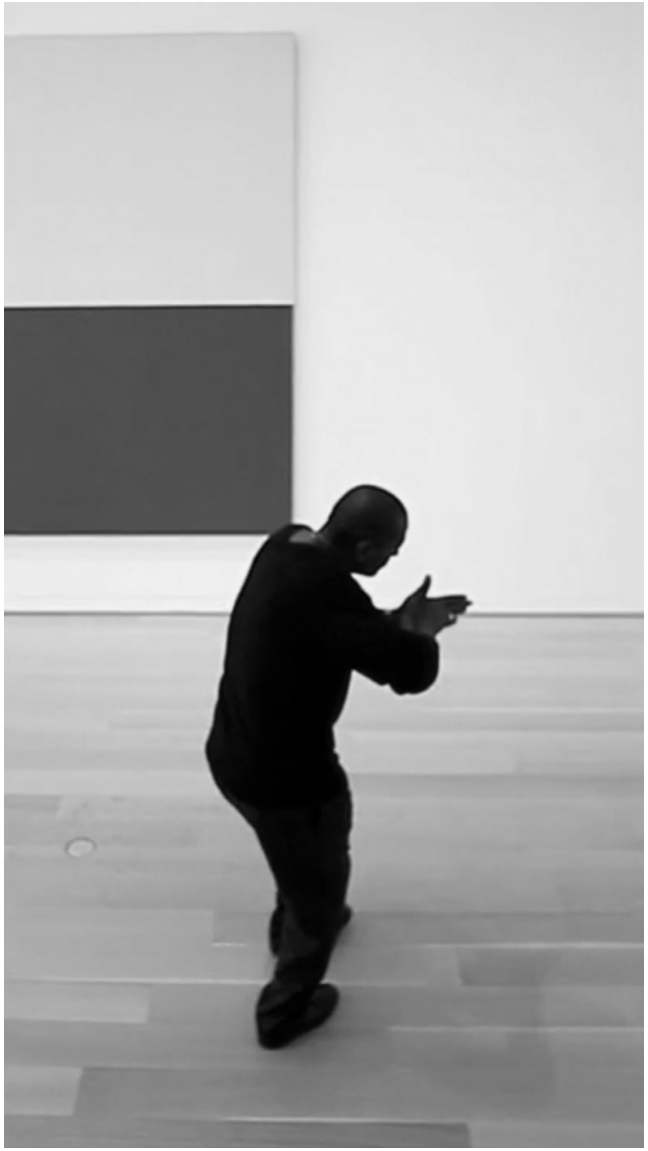


Figure 6.2
Still from Hito Steyerl's "Guards" (2012). Image CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl. Image courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

Figure 6.3
Still from Hito Steyerl's "Guards" (2012). Image CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl. Image courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

its sweet spot and immobilizes them there. In contrast, "Guards" shows that the securitization of such contemplative spaces requires a very different distribution of the sensible that is characterized by movement, relationality, and adaptability. The video conveys this through a variety of means, once again including tracking shots.

The guards repeatedly demonstrate how they "run their walls" to make sure that no potential threat escapes their observant eyes. As the camera slowly follows the guards tentatively skulking along the walls and around the corners of the gallery, the tracking shot again foregrounds the individual's relation to the environment (see figures 6.2 and 6.3). And again, this relation is constantly modulated toward the goal of an optimal management of visibilities. Here, vision must not be brought to rest on an art object; it must be dispersed across a dynamic relational field. Where the visitor may see a corner and curiously anticipate the next gallery of artworks, the museum guard perceives a potential hiding spot for an ambush. While the former may appreciate the visual pleasures of consuming the exhibited art, the latter is scanning the surroundings for the unexposed and the invisible. The extremely narrow vertical framing of the video increases the felt necessity for the constant reverification of the environment's security as it severely limits the field of vision and creates an apprehensive tone of visual uncertainty. Through these techniques, "Guards" shows how, in the wake of securitization processes, the museum as a paradigmatically transparent space of optimal visual consumption must at the same time be conceived as a zone of opacity and imperceptibility. A new perceptual ecology that feeds on assumed obscurity and potential threat has been inserted into the public space of the museum, allowing it to be controlled and exploited by private security companies.

The emphatic assumption of a potential stealthy intruder has effectively produced a stealthy regime of control. Indeed, the clear absence of concrete enemy operatives can always be recast as the characteristic feature of a potential threat. It is in this sense that stealth is cast as both a threat and solution in contemporary political culture. "Guards" brings out this aesthetic regime of power through the stark contrast between the museum as a site of visual consumption and the security guard's work at the threshold of the imperceptible. Because their hypervigilance and furtive efforts to secure the perimeter seem so out of place in the calm environment of the empty museum, the agenda of security politics is all the more salient—a spectacle of stealth.

Would the guards in "Guards" have seen Sam Fisher passing through? Would they have been able to counter Rust Cohle's stealth attack? We will never know. But it is clear that digital media—together with elected politicians, activists, and intellectuals—imagine efficient political action as organized around stealth and the figure of the stealth agent. Reviewing these various perspectives, it seems that stealth agents (and wannabes) are lurking all across the political landscape, lying in wait and eyeing each other from their various points of view.[17] That is why the notion of stealth can help problematize contemporary political culture.

Figures like Sam Fisher and Rust Cohle articulate the hands-on efficiency of executive action freed from the burden of public accountability. The "Guards" motivate their approach to securitization by referring to the threat of concerted stealth attacks and inhabit their environment following a similar logic of perceptual ecology. The stealth tracking shot—a long take in which a mobile camera follows an individual that is tentatively navigating a space full of adversities with the aim of staying undetected—is an important technique of this political aesthetic for several reasons. For starters, it highlights that the withdrawal into stealth reindividualizes the organization of a social environment and thus resists the transductive shift from the individual to transindividual, collective organization. It moreover foregrounds the fundamentally precarious position of the stealthy individual in its associated milieu, which creates requirements for flexible and relational movement as well as the necessity for just-in-time solutions. Finally, it positively affirms and values such efficient, even illicit behavior, especially if it is performed in spectacular manner by a virtuoso stealth agent. "You're not going to see our battles on CNN," Sam Fisher states. "If you do, then we've failed" (Michaels, 2004: 58).

But, of course, we *do* see these stealth agents in video games, TV series, and other media. We *see* how they remain *invisible*: the aesthetics of stealth is precisely about this aesthetic duplicity and all the other duplicities that follow suit. The fact that this aesthetic operates across various media and appeals to various positions in the political landscape speaks to the increased preoccupation with tactical imperceptibility in contemporary political culture more generally. The tracking shot as presented here, with its generic affiliation to crime fiction and action-adventures, is one of the ways in which media aesthetics can attune us, for better or worse, to the political ecology of stealth "democracy." The following chapters explore first the worse, then the better.

7 Surveillance Stealth 1: Conspiracy Thinking and Ubiquitous War

So far, stealth has been presented as a mode of action-perception. As such, the notion of stealth helps formulate a variety of productive political strategies because it explores the new perceptual thresholds of digital technology. The nimble circumnavigation of these thresholds allows for tactical imperceptibility. Yet stealth does not stop there; its expressive force is far from exhausted. Although initially a mode of resistance to the politics of representational capture, stealth always risks being represented, often in a spectacular manner. What happens when stealth—a mode of prehension, a manner of existence—is itself captured by representational logic? In the introduction of this book, a brief discussion of the Trump administration's discursive weaponization of the coronavirus as a "stealth virus" indicated that stories about stealth tend to ascribe conspiratorial intent to those who presumably operate in stealth. The "stealth virus" or "invisible enemy" *could have been* a conspiratorial stealth attack on the world, *possibly* cooked up in a Chinese lab. The rhetorical leap from stealth to possible conspiracy is quickly made. Similarly, Toby Beauchamp shows that trans individuals who "go stealth" can be suspected "of willful secrecy and concealment, perhaps even of conscious deception" (2019, 34; also see the introduction of this book). These narrativizations of stealth's perceptual logic forge a strong rhetorical link between imperceptibility and the intentional, deceptive withholding of information. Where there's stealth, there's likely to be conspiracy.

This chapter explores this connection between stealth and conspiracy. It argues that discourses of stealth make narrative interpretations of events in terms of conspiracy plausible and desirable. The argument rests on an analysis of the *Assassin's Creed* video game franchise (Ubisoft, 2007–present) and establishes how the world-building strategies and narrative logic of the series

articulate stealth gameplay and conspiracy thinking. More important, the argument further proposes that this relation between stealth and conspiracy functions to support digital culture's desire for data capture and surveillance: the supposed conspiratorial intent behind stealth provides an implicit legitimation for the pervasive capture and continuous tracking of worldly entities. An analysis of *Assassin's Creed*'s gameplay will show that its specific stealth largely relies on the identification, tracking, and targeting of enemy combatants through tech-enabled more-than-human capabilities of perception. These abilities for perceiving more than initially meets the eye act as a hinge for conspiratorial understandings of the world, for these more-than-human perceptual abilities allow the player to see that beneath the treacherous surfaces of the world's multiplicity lies a much simpler, dualist, and totalizing account of the world and its history. Ultimately, the argument concludes, the fraught alliance between stealth and conspiracy that this narrative logic enacts motivates a reconsideration of the world and its inhabitants as "targets" for total access, be it digital or physical. This is a strange reversal: while stealth as a mode of action-perception resists representational capture, the conspiratorial *representations of* stealth can end up motivating and legitimating that very capture.

In this, the argument diverges from other interpretations of *Assassin's Creed*'s politics. The franchise's worldview has been interpreted as politically "left-leaning" or even anarchist because the player steps into the role of an antiestablishment assassin (see, e.g., Carroll 2018). Such arguments occupy themselves with certain elements of the *content* of the conspiracy theory rather than the discursive operations of conspiracy thinking in the context of digital culture more generally. By contrast, this analysis focuses on the ways in which a politics of anticonspiracy/counterinsurgency is enacted through the series's "surveillance stealth." But to follow the argument, some narrative framing is necessary. So:

Who are these assassins? And what's the conspiracy?

The World of *Assassin's Creed*

Assassin's Creed is a masterstroke of world-building. The world of *Assassin's Creed* is both highly consistent and infinitely expandable due to the skillful integration of a number of world-building strategies. But here and elsewhere in this book, the word "master" and its related terms are used advisedly,

following Julietta Singh's *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Singh shows that "there is an intimate link between the mastery enacted through colonization and other forms of mastery that we often believe today to be harmless, worthwhile, even virtuous" (2018, 9). Mastery in the sense of a high "level of competence at a particular skill to become a teacher" implies superiority and authority over a certain domain of existence (9). Thus, "as a pursuit, mastery invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something—whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate. It aims for the full submission of an object—or something objectified—whether it be external or internal to oneself" (10). The world-building of *Assassin's Creed* constitutes a stroke of mastery in this expanded sense because it proposes a split and hierarchized view of world history by means of conspiracy thinking for the purpose of serialized extension of a franchise. This skillfully constructed fictional world is grounded in a speculative view of digital technology.

The game series is based on a science-fiction premise: In the present day, the corporation Abstergo has invented the Animus machine, a human-sized pod that allows its users to access their ancestors' memories, which are stored in the users' DNA. Those who lie down in and connect to the Animus seem unconscious but experience a full audiovisual and interactive simulation of their ancestors' lived experience. Think *The Matrix* meets 23andMe. This science-fiction premise is the frame narrative for the different installments, each of which allows the player to explore a new historical setting, one of the series main attractions. So far, these settings include ancient Egypt and Greece, medieval England and the Levant, northern Italy during the Renaissance, the eighteenth-century Caribbean, the east coast of North America during the US War of Independence, revolutionary Paris, and industrial London. These settings are usually re-created with great care and fidelity, presenting vast amounts of historical information narrativized by historians in Ubisoft's employ. In a sense, then, *Assassin's Creed* also belongs to the genre of historical fiction. This integration of science fiction and historical fiction is a first important world-building strategy, especially for a serial franchise, because it allows new installments always to be added via the frame narrative. In each game, a new present-day character can enter the Animus machine and access yet another historical setting. In practice, however, the same present-day character may serve to connect three different historical settings through the frame narrative. So Desmond Miles is a present-day descendant who

connects the main titles of the iconic *Ezio* trilogy (*AC2*, *Brotherhood,* and *Revelations*), and Layla Hassan enters the Animus on three different outings to connect *Origins*, *Odyssey,* and *Valhalla* in the *Mythology* trilogy. These character perspectives provide a modicum of coherence within the frame narration. But what connects the historical settings to each other?

This is where conspiracy thinking lends its world-building hand. *Assassin's Creed* initially connects relatively disparate historical events by suggesting that they are merely a front for the underlying age-old feud between the "Templars" and the "Assassins," two orders whose worldviews are fundamentally at odds with each other. The Templars pursue peace and progress by imposing authoritarian rule, best achieved in the form of a world government which, if necessary, may operate from the shadows. And it appears that this is quite necessary, whence their many transhistorical attempts to infiltrate state governments. While the Templars are initially introduced in the guise of the historical Order of the Knights Templar, over the course of the game series, it appears that they have operated for much longer under different names, the most important of which is the Order of the Ancients. In the aforementioned *Mythology* trilogy, which is partly set before the advent of Christianity and thus the Knights Templar, the Order of the Ancients is established by the historical pharaoh Smenkhkare in 1334 BCE and already holds a supremacist worldview that favors authoritarian rule. And who are these "Ancients"? Well, they are a master species of humanoid beings called the Isu whose civilization relied on highly advanced technology to hold dominion over Earth long before humans themselves existed—until they, the Isu, were almost completely wiped out in the Great Catastrophe (ca. 75,000 BCE). It turns out that many deities later revered by humans—such as Gautama Buddha, Isis, Saraswati, Persephone or Freya—were in fictional fact Isu, whose memory has survived the ages.

The first point of this synopsis is this: *Assassin's Creed*'s conspiracy narrative does not content itself with one layer or level of dissimulation. Behind almost every layer of the conspiratorial facade is another one, which can be peeled away to reveal an underlying truth. The world-building problem that *Assassin's Creed* gives us to consider is not that the world is duplicitous, that it folds this way and that, that it holds up one mask to cover its true face. The world's prehensions—true or false, but always real—are manifold. In this sense, the world of *Assassin's Creed* is thoroughly multiplicitous. The argument will return to this as it considers how the player peels away at this

treacherous manifold by means of Animus-enhanced perceptual abilities. Here, it is worth noting that the conspiratorial narrative of *Assassin's Creed* is not what needs to be demonstrated, not least because the game openly avows it. What's of interest is the precise articulation of conspiracy thinking and stealth as aspects of digital culture.

The stealth heroes of the game franchise are of course the Assassins, a secret brotherhood that has sworn to protect the world from supremacist rule, authoritarian overreach, and other abuses of power. In the franchise, the Assassins—or Hidden Ones, as they were called before the historical Assassins—are motivated by a belief in personal and collective freedom and thus often are associated with the historical liberation struggles of various populations, such as enslaved Africans of British colonial America in *Liberation* and the French people during the Revolution in *Unity*, but also both the American settlers and the indigenous Kanien'kehá:ka in *Assassin's Creed III* before and during the American Revolution. The various alliances become so convoluted that the franchise later—but earlier in the historical timeline—resorts to a commonplace element of video game narratives: The two playable characters of *Odyssey* are mercenaries whose alliance to historical figures of the Peloponnesian Wars changes depending on the most recent contract or questline. Money mediates even the most implausible alliances. *Valhalla*, the last entry in the *Mythology* trilogy, puts the player in the role of a Viking assassin who participates in the invasion of England. The franchise thus plays fast and loose with history as it plots the Assassin's fight onto historical events, a freedom that partly motivates interpretations that associate the Assassin's politics with libertarianism, even anarchism.

The eponymous creed of the Assassin—"Nothing is true. Everything is permitted."—can be read both as the fictional brotherhood's claim to anarcholibertarianism and as the guiding doctrine for the writers. Indeed, from the perspective of production, one could also just call it capitalism: *Assassin's Creed* builds a proprietary fictional world that can in principle infinitely extract valuable assets from the public domains of history and mythology. This is economic mastery by means of representational mastery. Coherency, plausibility, and strategy are not dispensable, but rather secondary. What takes precedence is the continuation of the production line by any means, including in this case the subordination of history to a totalizing narrative.

Conspiracy thinking is a helpful ally in this because it is "an active, endless process that continually seeks, but can never fully arrive at, a final

interpretation" (Fenster 2008, 96). Conspiracy theories structurally "exceed the particularities of established political conflicts . . . and seek more global and historical explanations of events" (97). In *Assassin's Creed*, the story of the prehistoric Isu and the ensuing conflict between the Order of the Ancients and the Hidden Ones serves as an "interpretive frame" deliberately engineered to subsume all of human history from its very beginning (100). All events are bound to connect somehow because they are organized by an all-encompassing master narrative. What remains to be filled in is the *somehow*, which can be as contrived as necessary. For example, a major break in the Assassin-Templar narrative can be "retroactively" explained by the existence of an Assassin who defects to the Templars, thus smoothening the historical connections by adding a wrinkle to the master narrative (106). Following Mark Fenster, then, the first and twofold world-building function of conspiracy theory is to maintain a continuous serialized "master signifier" and to modularize historical continuity as it tears "signs away from seemingly secure chains of dominant historical and news accounts [and] re-chains them to a new signifier" (111). In *Assassin's Creed*, historical events are consistently disconnected from their immediate sociopolitical importance and overcoded by the conspiracy theory to serve as storytelling modules that provide recognizable characters and events as set pieces for an action-adventure. You thought that Brutus killed Julius Caesar? No, it was Bayek the Hidden One, who stabbed Caesar for allying himself with the Order of the Ancients. Did you think that Rodrigo Borgia, later Pope Alexander VI, was a hallmark of straightforward nepotism with only his family's interests in mind? Well, not so straightforward for he was in fictional fact a Templar grandmaster. Machiavelli—Assassin. Robespierre—Templar. George Washington—Assassin. Thomas Edison—Templar. Alexander Graham Bell—Assassin. The importance of almost every historical figure is recoded and imported into a never-ending series of good versus evil episodes.

The second important world-building function of conspiracy theory has to do with its marginalizing function, which is also twofold. As Fenster points out, conspiracy thinking is a "speculative approach that assumes its own marginality" and thus always fights an uphill battle that is bound to be lost unless the powerful conspiracy is unmasked (104). Such is the challenge that the Assassins are facing, always only escaping the Templars by a hair's breadth. Recall that in the present-day frame narration, the Templars have organized into the Abstergo corporation, which developed and owns

the Animus machine, originally built to infiltrate the Assassins and their memories. The conspirators' domination is as good as certain. Yet the conspiracy theory also epistemically marginalizes the conspirators, who hide so well that they are only barely detectable.

Although the Templars (aka Abstergo, aka the Ancient Ones) can be temporarily foiled and some of their leaders permanently eliminated, as an organization they merely withdraw to the shadows to reorganize and emerge for another attempt at world domination at the opportune moment. That is why the conspiracy needs to be uncovered over and over again. Thus, the marginality of both conspiracy theorists and their adversaries, the conspirators, motivates both the heroism of the former and the eternal elusiveness of the latter. Consequently, there must always be another installment of *Assassin's Creed*. At the same time, the marginality of both the Assassins and their opponents is normalized as the main arena for historical change. If power operates beyond public scrutiny, then the shadows of the margin are the place to be.

So each installment presents an action-adventure in a spectacular historical set piece with a plot that mixes historical fact with a fairly conventional conspiracy plot. To give a more detailed example of how an individual installment plays out, consider the story of Connor in *Assassin's Creed III*. Connor, an ancestor of the abovementioned Desmond Miles, is born in 1756 to a Mohawk woman and a British Templar (!). At the age of six, while playing near his village in the Mohawk valley, Connor is suddenly confronted by Charles Lee, a general of the Continental Army and member of the Colonial Templars. Lee is putting pressure on the Mohawk tribe to lead him to an Isu artifact in a nearby Isu temple. In the commotion, Connor is knocked unconscious, and when he comes to, he finds himself embroiled first with history and then with conspiracy: Connor's village has been set on fire by the American colonizers and his mother dies in front of him. But this political conflict with the colonizer, he finds out, is at the same time a conflict with the Templars, who are after the Isu artifact that Connor's tribe is supposed to protect. Connor thus joins the Colonial Brotherhood and eventually sets out to stealthily eliminate one minor historical figure/Colonial Templar after the other: William Johnson, John Pitcairn, Thomas Hickey, Benjamin Church. These series of assassinations are a recurring element of the franchise; they are important because they narrativize the systematic eradication of a *network* of conspirators. This chapter will return to that point later. After the final

showdown with Charles Lee, Connor takes possession of the Isu artifacts; the Templar conspiracy has been foiled once more.

But what does the player do to reach their goal? From a gameplay perspective, *Assassin's Creed* games have turned more and more into increasingly large sandboxes that allow a large variety of activities. *Assassin's Creed* is a typical—if not *the* archetypical—contemporary open-world action-adventure, meaning that the core gameplay activities in the open world in the main campaign comprise exploration, combat, and puzzling combined with continuous improvement of the avatar through skill points or other unlockable skills like throwing smoke bombs or knives. Next to that, the open worlds of the franchise offer an increasing variety of side activities which, in the latest games, include such pastimes as hunting and fishing, looking for treasure chests, or playing board games (within the game). Besides that, *Assassin's Creed* largely relies on—and, indeed, helped develop and conventionalize—the open-world model introduced in chapter 6: the open world is dotted with "restricted areas," often strategic sites such as forts, harbors, and quarries that are strongly protected. They therefore require stealth. In *Assassin's Creed III*, the player has to move Connor from one restricted area/stealth challenge to the next to uncover the Templar conspiracy and complete each area's stealth challenge to eventually eliminate the conspirators.

For example, in the mission "Lee's Last Stand,"[1] Connor prepares for the abovementioned showdown by infiltrating Fort George, where he suspects Charles Lee to be hiding. More specifically, the task is to stealthily sneak to a signal fire inside the fort and light it to alert various allies that an open, concerted attack against the Templars can begin. As the gameplay analysis will show more clearly later, this operational sequence, in which stealth merely prepares violent access, is characteristic of *Assassin's Creed*'s surveillance stealth. For now, it is worth noting that the gameplay of the franchise partly relies on the sneaking stealth foregrounded in chapter 5: Connor enters the fort through a secret tunnel and emerges from a well. He takes out the guard leaning on the well with the franchise's iconic "hidden blade," a retractable blade that springs from the Assassin's wrist and ensures a one-stab kill when the player approaches their target in stealth. The incapacitated guard drops into the well. Connor can then rely on various mapping and navigation tools, such as the "minimap" in the bottom-left corner of the screen, to analyze his surroundings and establish enemy positions and sight lines. This allows him to furtively scale buildings inside the fort and lithely "parkour"

over rooftops to remain out of sight. There, too, a couple of guards are patrolling and must be either evaded through careful use of the architecture or eliminated by means of the hidden blade. The completion of the stealth challenge triggers the next story event: once Connor lights the signal fire, the attack on Fort George begins, and Connor is ready to confront Charles Lee and foil the conspiracy.

In this way, *Assassin's Creed* derives the need for stealth from conspiracy. The conspiracy pervades the world so thoroughly that one cannot fight it out in the open. One must become like the enemy and operate in stealth. Thus, the conspiracy-based world-building of *Assassin's Creed* is not only a framing device for potentially endless storytelling. The conspiratorial world-building also frames the core gameplay mechanics of stealth as the act of furtively uncovering and thus ascertaining the truth of conspiracy. Importantly, this is done by means of—but also for the sake of—a digital device, the Animus.

A Series of Digital Conversions

If you enter the Animus, the machine reads your DNA to simulate the past experience of one of your ancestors and lets you interact with that experience. To grasp the connection between stealth and conspiracy theory, it is worth briefly assessing the rationale behind this science fiction. The technology behind the Animus machine relies on a peculiar combination of genetic determinism and Lamarckianism, the idea that ontogenetically acquired characteristics can be passed on to subsequent generations. *Assassin's Creed*'s dials Lamarckianism up to 11 to motivate the idea that the entirety of an individual's lived experience is encoded in their DNA. Here, DNA is astonishingly prehensive. Yet the series' science-fiction is also grounded in genetic determinism because this hyperprehensive DNA is at the same time conceived as a coded script that, once decoded, can be converted and translated into a representation. Thus, *Assassin's Creed* conceives of the passage from living matter (genes) to psychological experience (memory) to virtual representation (Animus simulation) as a series of calculable conversions. In a classic act of remediation, this science-fiction premise is built to support the fulfillment of the desire for digital immediacy by proliferating mediations (Bolter and Grusin 1999). And, of course, this desire isn't foreign to conspiracy theories either, as they long for immediate knowledge about a truth that has been veiled. It is in this overlap between layers of truth and the coded levels of

existence—molecule, experience, representation—that digital culture meets conspiracy thinking. This overlap is articulated in the stealth gameplay of the series. Two important game mechanics of *Assassin's Creed* make this particularly evident: the penetrating eye of Eagle Vision and the vertical overview provided by minimaps. These are game mechanics that are implemented in many stealth video games and, indeed, they constitute important elements of gaming interfaces more generally. Consequently, the political valence of these mechanics in general cannot be restricted to stealth games alone. Yet the analytical focus on stealth allows insights into digital culture more generally. The following gameplay analysis is an attempt to engage with the stealth fantasy of *Assassin's Creed* to understand how the digital makes us prehend the world.

As touched upon in chapter 6, many video games simulate three-dimensional game spaces by means of a two-dimensional interface displayed on a flat screen. Depending on the challenge that the game wants to formulate for the player, this creates a number of design problems, especially in stealth games. Suppose that you play an Assassin and are tasked to sneakily infiltrate a fort that is protected by dozens of guards whose patrol routes you do not know. How can you, the player looking at a flat screen, prehend complex enemy behavior in three dimensions without being prehended in return? There are various solutions to this problem, including the implementation of 3D sound, which is particularly important in competitive first-person shooter games: experienced players can sometimes hear their adversaries and situate them within the game space seconds before they see them. Stealth games, which tend to be single-player experiences, usually implement a mechanism that makes the game space transparent to the player. At the push of a button, the interface reveals enemies and objects of interest positioned behind walls. Depending on the game, such objects might include security cameras, hackable devices, or valuable collectibles.

The narrative explanation for this ability also varies. In Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* series (discussed in chapter 4), this mechanic is motivated by the hacking theme of the series and appropriately called the NetHack view. In *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* (discussed in chapter 6), the mechanic is implemented through the use of various high-tech goggles that enable night vision, sonar detection, and footprint tracking among others. In the *Dishonored* series (discussed in chapter 9), so-called Dark Vision is a supernatural ability that reveals enemies and their line of sight and weapons, as well as items of interest such as secret

mechanisms in the environment (Bethesda 2012–2017). In the *Hitman* series (discussed in chapter 10), the mechanic is called "Instinct" and is implied to be the result of Agent 47's many years of experience in the field (IO Interactive 2000–2021). *The Last of Us* calls it "Listen mode" and visualizes what the avatar in their 3D game world can supposedly hear but the player cannot (Naughty Dog, 2013–2024). The specific implementation of this superhuman "vision" may differ significantly from game to game: its duration and range may be limited; it may be a basic mechanic or an acquired ability; and it might be upgradable. But overall, 3D games that belong to the stealth genre usually include it in one mode or another to allow the player to see more than meets their avatar's naked eye. In *Assassin's Creed*, it is called Eagle Vision.

As the series has progressed, Eagle Vision has undergone an interesting evolution in terms of its narrative explanation as well as its gameplay functionality. In *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, the historical pirate Mary Reid, disguised as James Kidd, instructs the playable Edward Kenway to "look past shadow and sound, deep into matter, until you see and hear a kind of shimmering." Kenway understands that Reid/Kidd speaks of a faculty that he has known since childhood and acknowledges: "To see sounds and hear shapes. Quite a combination." Here, Eagle Vision is explained as a form of synesthesia, bringing into vision what is picked up in another sense mode. It is, as Reid/Kidd states, an "intuition" that all people possess but that reveals itself in only a few. Later in the series, it is established that humans have acquired this ability by exchanging genes—mating, that is—with the Isu. But however the phylogeny of Eagle Vision is explained, it is important to note that, both for the user of the Animus and the player, it is rendered by means of digital special effects produced by the Animus itself. It is, simply put, a tagging mechanic. In the early games up to the *Mythology* trilogy, Eagle Vision creates different color overlays for different types of elements and thus helps parse information in the game world. Enemies are tagged in red, allies are blue, and potential hiding spots and other gameplay affordances are highlighted in white. Special targets such as dissimulating Templars have a golden overlay. As a game mechanic, then, Eagle Vision and its analogs in other stealth games are a method for simplifying and managing the flood of visual information that the digital interface presents. As a narrative element, Eagle Vision allows the player to see through the deceiving facade of official history and recognize the underlying conspiracy.

The coupling of these functions is not coincidental. Here too, *Assassin's Creed* relies on a series of mediations that equates a faculty supposedly inherited from the master species of the Isu with the prehensive prowess of digital technology and, ultimately, the ability to unveil conspiracy. In this manner, *Assassin's Creed*'s game mechanics pick up on an old trope of conspiracy thinking—the "all-penetrating eye"—and give it a digital upgrade. Jürgen Link has shown that this trope fulfils a precise discursive function in the conspiracy theories of early modernity or what he, with a focus on Germany, calls the "Goethe period" (Link 1994). And much as in *Assassin's Creed*, this function has to do with the difficulty of giving a satisfying narrative account of political events of historic dimensions. One of the specific challenges of the Goethe period resulted from the realization that European history seemed newly informed and transformed by mass movements. This was the shock of the French and American revolutions and a challenge, especially for historiographers: history could no longer be understood and written only in terms of the conflicts between powerful rulers such as kings and dukes who command their subjects and events. The writing of history must now also account for the diffuse and unruly masses of people who had so clearly established themselves as a historical force in their own right during these revolutions.

In other words, historians and authors of historical fiction reached the heuristic limits of their theory of history, a theory that Link refers to as *interactionism*. In good Enlightenment fashion, interactionism assumes that social and political acts are motivated by the purposes, values, desires, and habits of individuals (1994, 7). Link associates this view of history with Max Weber's later notion of "methodological individualism," which, in the context of sociology, also gives explanatory primacy to the intentions of individual actors pursuing particular goals (7). Indicating that this theoretical precept will later serve to ground rational-choice theories of the market, Link also highlights the oblique connections between Enlightenment theories of history and contemporary understandings of economic subjects. As a corollary of its methodological individualism, interactionism has difficulties grasping, let alone explaining, phenomena of mass mobilization as meaningful sociohistorical developments. Yet this problem by no means spelled the end of interactionist accounts of history and their "Great Men." Indeed, as this reading of *Assassin's Creed* means to suggest, interactionism survives to this day and is ultimately bolstered by discursive imaginaries of the digital. This has

been possible because the interactionist accounts of the history of the Goethe period made a strategic discursive alliance with conspiracy thinking.

The abovementioned discursive function of conspiracy thinking in the context of especially fictional accounts of history is to create an interpretive toggle between an overwhelming flood of new and complex social developments and the interactionist mode of explaining history in terms of linear relations of cause and effect or intention and action. In Schiller's history dramas, for instance, the point of the conspiracy is "to completely model revolutionary processes that follow a mass dynamic as a network of interactions" (Link 1994, 9). Simply put, conspiracy thinking helps salvage interactionism by suggesting that behind the opaque operations of every mass movement, one can find an intentional subject consciously pursuing particular goals—much as Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of the market is deemed rational by virtue of many individuals' supposedly rational choices. The "projection of conspiracies" onto "processes of mass dynamics" protects the interactionist perspective (12). In this discourse-analytical perspective, mainstream European thought since the Enlightenment has *needed* conspiracy thinking to both maintain and compensate for its excessive individualism and its resulting inability to think collective social action in its own right. Later in this chapter, the argument will turn to the concrete political valence of this discursive constellation. First, though, the connection between conspiracy theory and historical fiction established by Link must be related to the gameplay of *Assassin's Creed*.

To legitimate the discursive toggle between observed historical events and their interactionist interpretation, conspiracy thinking postulates the existence of an "all-seeing eye" as a mediating instance. The powerful eye that "penetrates" everything is first ascribed to the conspiratorial adversary, whose long-standing, veiled machinations have managed to connect all those incidents that might seem like mere "contingencies" to the conspirators' more gullible victims (Link 1994, 13). The paranoid edge of conspiracy thinking comes to expression in this assumption that "we believers" are all entirely transparent and thus vulnerable to an opaque instance of powerful control. In a subsequent countermove, this projection of the all-seeing eye onto the unseen enemy serves as a motivation for the conspiracy's victims' own quest for transparency. Indeed, the obligation to uncover the hidden causal connections between seemingly contingent events falls to the conspiracy thinker as a matter of self-protection. Following the conventional

metaphor, the conspiracy thinker must locate the spider lurking in the dark corners of its web of intrigue by following each of its silken strings to the next node, and the next and the next, all the way to the supposed master plotter. But given that the master plotter is in fact the conspiracy theorist themself, the conceit of the all-seeing eye figures as an aesthetic-epistemic faculty that indicates the conspirator's nefarious resourcefulness as well as the victim's desire for transparency and aspiration to total access.

In light of all this, *Assassin's Creed*'s Eagle Vision—much like its homologs in other stealth games—stands out because it fuses the two sides of the conceit in the gameplay even as the distinction between all-seeing conspirators and anticonspiracy fighters is maintained in the narrative. This is why it's important that the Animus machine is the intellectual property of Abstergo: the digital device that enables the transparency of the all-seeing eye is first invented and owned by the conspirators who have sought world domination for millennia. And whenever an Assassin enters an Animus simulation throughout the series, the device that they use is usually a stolen or hacked version of the Animus. In terms of gameplay, then, the faculty of the all-seeing eye is transferred onto the player and their Assassin avatar. It is they whose Eagle Vision penetrates walls and perceives the enemies' every move. From a gameplay perspective, it is first and foremost the Assassins, the trans-historical counterconspiracy stealth taskforce, to whom the world becomes transparent. This is to say that the design of *Assassin's Creed*'s graphical user interface—that of the fictional Animus as much as that of the game itself—is an aesthetic rearticulation of the discursive tropes of conspiracy thinking. The way in which Eagle Vision informs the player is analogous to the way in which conspiracy theories convert the contingencies of mass phenomena into the intentional acts of powerful individuals. Like interactionist conspiracy thinking, Eagle Vision purports to observe an overwhelming flood of obscurely connected information and, by means of tagging, simplifies it into the user-friendly duality of friend and foe. In this way, *Assassin's Creed* "bakes" the precepts of conspiracy thinking right into its gameplay aesthetic and the implied vision of how the digital interfaces with the human.

At first sight, the digital transparency of Eagle Vision might seem similar to the "dataphanous" interface of *Watch Dogs: Legion* (WDL), as discussed in chapter 4. But the interface aesthetics of these two games lead players to engage with the digital interface in very different ways. And these differences also point to diverging understandings of stealth's political valence. In WDL,

the simulated game space becomes dataphanous to highlight the fact that playing a stealth game is always a matter of testing and attuning to the prehensive thresholds of algorithmic processes. It also foregrounds the various algorithmic affordances that allow the player to modulate the environment in one's favor. Thus, the dataphanous interface of WDL and the technostealth that it enables are thoroughly process-oriented, in that they allow for a productive mapping and modulation of the underlying algorithmic territory. This articulation of digital stealth encourages (but does not strictly require) a gameplay style that seeks to inform the game software toward a state of nonlethal and even peaceful coexistence. Put differently, this kind of stealth gameplay pursues the mutual information of player and software that requires the least collateral damage.

By contrast, *Assassin's Creed*'s Eagle Vision functions as a mechanism for comprehensive mapping that serves the main purpose of capturing the positions of individuals and other points of interest to prepare access. Once the enemies' positions have been stealthily mapped, they are ready for a violent takedown—either in open combat, which is grounded in the historical period represented and has been increasingly foregrounded over the series, or by means of the hidden blade. In this way, *Assassin's Creed* separates the perceptive capabilities of surveillance stealth from the force-on-force combat of a given historical epoch and leaves both of them intact. Even the more fantastical combat skills in the *Mythology* trilogy are explained as Isu inheritances rather than digital enhancements. As a result of all this, *Assassin's Creed* limits the function of stealth to visual capture and unobserved access to an enemy combatant. It lacks precisely the kind of world-making powers that other stealth games articulate and that will be further explored in the following chapters. In this gameplay aesthetic, stealth is a preparatory aesthetic stage for violent kinetic engagement.

This can be demonstrated by examining the use of minimaps, the small circular or rectangular interfaces-within-the-interface that look at the game space from above, mark the avatar's position in their center, and update their surroundings in real time. Inspired by military-developed technologies like GPS, the minimap complements Eagle Vision's horizontal transparency with vertical access across a certain range. By means of the minimap, the player can not only better understand the positions and distances of enemies, which can be hard to gauge from the over-the-shoulder following camera. Their attention is also drawn to a panoply of other pieces of intelligence that

may be relevant in a given situation or not. Indeed, this aesthetic-epistemic advantage that the minimap provides also constitutes its major disadvantage in terms of gameplay.

Following video game critics like Mark Brown or Kirk Hamilton, minimaps are a bad solution to the abovementioned problem of navigating a 3D game space via a 2D interface because they contain too much information (Brown 2015, Hamilton 2017). In *Assassin's Creed Unity*, for instance, the wealth of information displayed in the minimap is so great that the player may get continuously sidetracked. Even worse, in a large game space like *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*'s London, which can be traversed using horse-drawn carriages, it is possible and sometimes more convenient to navigate by looking at the minimap rather than the actual gameplay—much like a present-day tourist might navigate London by looking at Google Maps rather than their actual surroundings. As Brown puts it, one ends up "following the little dotted line" on the minimap rather than freely exploring the world, which is what the open worlds of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise promise. This is one way in which *Assassin's Creed* reproduces what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun calls software's "logic of command" (2011, 22). Similarly, the enemy positions on the minimap function as a series of markers that the player needs to move through to get to their mission goal. What happens in these situations is that the map gains primacy over the territory—and this aesthetic-epistemic primacy of the map once again yokes digital culture to conspiracy thinking.

On the one hand, the minimap is an example of the instrumentalization of digital technology for what Lisa Parks has called "vertical mediation," "the use of aero-orbital technologies (satellites, aircraft, transmitters) and spaces (orbit, air, spectrum) to support such activities as the international distribution of audiovisual signals, the patrolling of movements on and beneath the earth's surface, and the physical destruction and reconstruction of lifeworlds from above" (2018, 9). Unlike Eagle Vision, the minimap in *Assassin's Creed* is not provided with a deep narrative explanation, let alone mythological background. It thus appears as a straightforward feature of the Animus machine that surely has no problems extracting a simplified map from the complex simulated world that it conjured up in the first place. The minimap is a visualization extracted from a visualization and captures the elements of the world as points on a geometrical representation, thereby easing access to those elements. In this way, the player can monitor what is happening "behind" them

or off-screen, something that is important in stealth sequences that require the consideration of movement patterns and lines of sight.

Already in terms of gameplay aesthetics, then, the "first" spectacular and more immediate, 3D simulation of historical reality was never enough to accomplish the Assassins' mission. Even Eagle Vision by itself does not allow for complete access to the surrounding world. But there's more at stake here than gameplay affordances. As Parks has shown, such representations "are not benign abstractions" that serve mainly as visual aids. Rather, "they are used to catalyze geopolitical agendas, rationalize military interventions, and develop postwar futures" (104). This is also the case in *Assassin's Creed* because, to follow Parks, the minimap is a geospatial visualization that is "already read" and interpreted in terms of the conspiratorial master narrative before the player uses it (111). When it simplifies the world by distributing enemy markers according to friend-versus-foe duality, it also reassures the player that everyone marked as a target must be picked off the map. Presumably based on "raw data" extracted from the user's DNA, the second-level reading that constitutes the minimap already distributes reality in terms of categories that should be problematic but are presented as self-evident. Thus, when the traces of this preinterpretation are "inscribed" in the visualization of the minimap, they "signify more than the image data itself"(111). They imply a license to kill.

But exactly how the Animus machine marks people for elimination remains unintelligible for the player, who cannot and need not question the mechanics. The aesthetic and geopolitical literacies required to produce such consequential distributions of reality are now fully relegated to the digital machine. Once again, this operative logic of surveillance stealth stands in contrast to the way in which visual cues are embedded in the interface of WDL as affordances for potential action (chapter 4). In *Assassin's Creed*'s surveillance stealth, each red dot on the minimap is the "focused content" of perception, a target marked for certain elimination. Not only does information embedded in the interface relieve players from having to reflect on the value and importance of various worldly elements, but they hardly even need to calibrate their actions to the world in motion because the preferred mode of encounter with those elements is inscribed in the map by the conspiracy theory itself: the violent disruption of the conspiratorial network through an attack on all its nodes, one after the other.

In this way, the digital simulations of the Animus not only decode preexisting reality; they "overcode" it in terms of simplified political precepts (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 62); more on this in chapter 8. The vertical minimap thus not only facilitates, but motivates and incites the force-on-force action of the combat gameplay. Now, if vertical surveillance provides the self-evident visual evidence required to operationalize conspiracy's antagonistic worldview, this operational logic of monitoring-to-kill is in return supported by conspiracy thinking's "endless desire for a totalizing method of mapping" (Fenster 2008, 96). That is, conspiracy provides aesthetic-epistemic justification for digital surveillance: the world, a manifold of prehensions, comes as an overwhelming and impenetrable flood of information that is fundamentally suspect. It must be parsed in terms that a human being can access and process, such as the dualistic terms of transhistorical worldwide conspiracy. In this way, conspiracy thinking sanctions digital surveillance for the sake of counterconspiracy and produces the kind of mapping that the enemy is presumed to possess. Or, to quote Rey Chow, the moralistic implications of conspiracy thinking, "insofar as it produces knowledge about the 'self' and 'other'—and hence the 'eye' and its 'target'—as such, justifies war by its very dichotomizing logic" (2006, 36).

And conversely, digital surveillance "fixes the other in its attributed monstrosity and affirms the idealized image of the self" (36). Of course, this representational logic covers up the fact that, operationally, self and other—conspiracy theorist and presumed conspirator—are more attuned than one might like to admit. What stands out is that, from both perspectives, the map precedes and shapes the territory: Just as conspiracy thinkers already know according to which master narrative the world needs to be interpreted, digital surveillance plots targets on a map before the player might have prehended them as such in the territory. This combination of digital surveillance and conspiracy theory supports a preemptive approach to political action (Parks 2018, 112; see also Massumi 2015a and Pape 2019). The orientation of the gameplay toward targeting-to-eliminate also evidences how the surveillance stealth of *Assassin's Creed* abandons stealth's potential for collective worldmaking with technology that is foregrounded elsewhere in this book. Instead of investing the associated milieu's potential in a project of continued modulation of the surroundings to advance collective individuation, the gameplay encourages the player to process the world in such a way as to produce prehensions of fixed subjects and objects or, better, of objectified subjects

with a presumed inimical interiority. This rush toward the objectifying identification of subjects is a push toward the end of processes of subjectivation: It is in becoming subjects and objects that vital processes perish and become products, the "raw material" for extractive processing in the logistics of war (Whitehead 1967a, 177; Harney and Moten 2021, 18).

Overall, then, *Assassin's Creed*'s surveillance stealth articulates an aesthetic-epistemic configuration of conspiracy thinking and digital technology in which the world is bound to figure as a target (Chow 2006). While the franchise emphatically promises to immerse the player in faithful re-creations of historical settings, this configuration also inevitably—and much less emphatically—renders these settings as generalized battle zones. Here, stealth gameplay supports the secretive surveillance of the world, a surveillance that aims at preforming the world to facilitate forceful access. Put differently, *Assassin's Creed*'s surveillance stealth filters world history through the military "logistics of perception" to provide targets for the supply chain of the military-entertainment complex (Chow 2006, 32). Bolstered by conspiracy thinking, *Assassin's Creed*'s stealth gameplay also blurs the lines between war and peace. No matter where in the world, no matter when in history, an originary yet imperceptible war is sure to be raging. Always, everywhere. Therefore, whether you are in Renaissance Rome or industrial England, the site-specific struggles must always be reframed in terms of digital access to a relatively homogeneous group of targets. *Assassin's Creed*'s fictional world of conspiracy, surveillance, and stealth attunes the player to the logics of the "forever war" and the "everywhere war" (Filkins 2008, Gregory 2011). In return, this total war justifies the total access of logistical capitalism (Harney and Moten 2021, 38).

Surveillance Stealth Reloaded

Both Eagle Vision and the minimap have been thoroughly redesigned in *Assassin's Creed*'s *Mythology* trilogy, composed of the titles *Origins* (2017), which is set in ancient Egypt; *Odyssey* (2018), set during the Peloponnesian Wars; and *Valhalla* (2020), set during the Viking expansion into England. In these titles, the franchise develops a new mechanic for both horizontal and vertical visual access to the world, which is relevant to the present argument. In particular, it helps demonstrate how the gameplay of *Assassin's Creed* enacts the epistemology of conspiracy theories.

Eagle Vision's redesign partly retains, replaces, and expands on its earlier iterations. First, the games retain the all-seeing eye, now variously referred to as Animus Pulse, Athena's Sight, and Odin's Sight depending on the historical setting and its mythological reference frame. It largely functions in the same way as in previous games, and thus the preceding argument applies. Second, the *Mythology* trilogy replaces the minimap with a navigational mechanic called "compass." As figure 7.1 shows, the compass is displayed as an element of the head-up display (HUD) at the top of the screen. It is arranged horizontally, with the "compass needle" in the middle and always pointing in the same direction as the following camera. The compass thus always moves in the direction the player chooses to look in, which also means that the information currently displayed by the compass is more or less restricted to the interface's overall field of vision. The compass marks the four cardinal directions, as well as important landmarks and their distance relative to the avatar. In figure 7.1, the very small letters "E" for East to the left and "S" for South to the right of the compass needle indicate that the player is entering Northwic (present-day Norwich) from the southeasterly direction (by means of a Viking longship). The icons arranged horizontally above the compass needle indicate various points of interest in front of the avatar as well as to the left and right. For example, the bag icon just right of the compass needle

Figure 7.1
Navigation by means of a "compass" at the top of the screen. Still from *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (Ubisoft 2020).

indicates the position of a trader at a distance of 94 meters. The green Celtic knot, to the right of the bag, indicates the objective of the current quest. The eagle icon, to the left of the bag, is an elevated synchronization point that allows vertical visual access to the surrounding area. The fuzzy dots to the left are points of interest that the player has not identified yet. The compass has the advantage of dispensing with a top-down representation of the game space that, as already mentioned, hinders the orientation within the game space by means of a second-level visualization. It is meant to better immerse the player in the simulated game world. A further gameplay advantage consists in the compass' affordance to guide the player to a point of interest by aligning that point with the compass needle but without already mapping out a trajectory to that point. This lack of the "little dotted line" is meant to encourage exploration. Finally, in terms of interface design, the compass has the advantage of moving location aids to the margin of the frame and thus decluttering the center of the screen, where quest markers appeared in previous games. Overall, the compass emphasizes horizontal orientation within the game world.

Third and last, to ensure an alternative vertical access to the game space, Eagle Vision is expanded upon in a quite ingenious literalization. In *Origins*, the player learns that their avatar Bayek, a founder of the Hidden Ones, has a quasi-symbiotic relationship with an eagle called Senu. So strong is their connection that the player can at will toggle between Bayek's consciousness and Senu's. At the press of a button, the following camera rushes upward to the sky to hover behind the eagle and oversee the surrounding area. Figure 7.2 shows Senu flying over Bayek's hometown, Siwa, highlighting several points of interest. Senu, as well as her later counterparts Ikaros in *Odyssey* and the raven Sýnin in *Valhalla,* are able to fly over the game world independently to discover and identify points of interest over large distances. This literal eagle vision provides an overview of the world that is embedded in the historical setting itself and thus avoids the addition of second-level visualizations. It furthermore allows the players to visualize the game world at a variable scale by flying closer to the ground or higher up. This variable scale ranges usefully between the large scale of the avatar-associated main perspective and the small scale of the world map and thus gives the player a flexible, pragmatic grasp of the concrete game space. In this way, the renewed Eagle Vision considerably reduces recourse to the world map, even though such a map continues to be accessible through the game menu. The advantage of Eagle Vision's

Figure 7.2
Eagle Vision in the *Mythology* trilogy allows the player to oversee the game space from a bird's-eye view. Still from *Assassin's Creed Origins* (Ubisoft 2017).

variable scale is particularly evident when Senu and company go into "Hover Mode," closer to the ground. In this mode, Senu, Ikaros, and Sýnin target a small area with a reticle. Any enemy or resource that is targeted by the reticle is also mapped and tagged with relevant information regarding their enemy type or power level. Once the player returns to Bayek's view, tagged enemies retain a white outline that is visible through walls and allows the stealthy navigation of the game space. In this way, the literalized Eagle Vision functionally replaces the minimap as a vertical reconnaissance tool. So long as the player is not engaged in open combat, they can always toggle back to Eagle Vision to verify enemy positions and movement patterns from above.

This transformation of Eagle Vision is relevant to the present argument in several ways. Most importantly, it helps further inscribe the epistemology of conspiracy theories in the gameplay and articulates it with aspects of network-centric warfare. When the player puts their eagle or raven into Hover Mode, the reticle not only registers enemies and other gameplay affordances. It can also capture intelligence: clues that can help the player find and eliminate all the members of the conspiracy who operate behind the events of the main campaign, so to speak. These members are organized into "orders": across the *Mythology* trilogy, the Ancient Ones organize into

the "Order of Dominion," "Cult of Cosmos," or, more plainly, the "Order of the Ancients." Figure 7.3 shows the menu page that *Valhalla* dedicates to the wider conspiracy. As can be seen, these menus visualize the conspiracy as a network. Initially, these network maps are blank or empty: none of the members' identities are known. The player will find some of the members during the main campaign, but the majority of them must be identified by the player. This can be done by picking up "clues," usually three per member after obtaining a first hint. For example, in Valhalla, the player may find a first note that refers to one or more of the members of the Order of the Ancients by their code names: "For the Adze [one members' code name], Tell the Lathe [another code name] that his gambling friend is causing trouble. The one at the inn in Buckingham. Have the Lathe put a stop to his blabbering.—The Order." Once this note has been obtained by the player, the game instructs the player: "Defeat the dice champion found at Buckingham's inn in northern Oxenefordscire."

After a round of the mini game-within-a-game Orlog, the defeated but still blabbering dice champion provides the following intel: "Investigate the sealed chamber on the grounds of Eatun Barn, east of Oxeneforda in Oxenefordscire." There the player can find the final piece of evidence, which

Figure 7.3
The networked representation of the Order of the Ancients in *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (Ubisoft 2020).

identifies the Lathe as the priest Mucel, who "can be found repairing his ships near the dock of Buckingham in Oxenefordscire." The player can now locate Mucel and kill him, which also gives the player the first clue for finding the next member of the Order of the Ancients, the Ash-Spear. And so the hunt continues.

One could say that this part of the game simulates a forensic attitude where truth-finding requires thorough verification as a "contingent, collective, and poly-perspectival" practice (Weizmann 2019). After all, each identity must be ascertained by cross-referencing it with various other nodes in the network. But note that an important part of the truth precedes all this verification work: Curiously, the diagrammatic shape of the network and its internal relations are somehow known from the very beginning. Most likely, the Animus extracted this fillable map from its user's DNA and projects it into their ancestor's past. So the network map is yet another preemptive visualization that both articulates a conspiratorial worldview and implies a kill order. *Assassin's Creed* surveillance stealth may suggests a forensic or even counterforensic attitude, but instead of working toward an as-yet-uncertain truth, it operationalizes surveillance data (decoded DNA, presumably) to visualize a preexisting adversarial logic. The player is bound to find what the technology knew all along.

In all of this, the redesigned Eagle Vision is crucial. Many clues that indicate places are relatively vague: "northern Oxenefordscire" or "east of Oxeneforda." To pinpoint these locations, the player must first enter these large areas. Once close enough, the interface will indicate that the player is in the vicinity of the current target. This is a signal for the player to enter Eagle Vision, and eventually Hover Mode. The player can now let the interface's search reticle hover over the area and precisely locate the clue or conspirator. And this also ascertains the clue's truth. That is to say, information is never verified in *Assassin's Creed*. It is simply given or captured and thus accepted by the player as evidence of what was to be known. If the obtained intelligence ever were verified, this must once again have happened inside the digital blackbox, the Animus machine. But from the player's perspective, observation is verification. Eagle Vision supports a pseudoforensic attitude that purports to construct truths from networked worldly data. But it really performs the epistemic precepts of conspiracy thinking, which promote the collection of bits of information that then must—and always can—be fitted into the interpretive framework of the master narrative.

This also confirms the interpretation of *Assassin's Creed*'s surveillance stealth as a technique for predatory reconnaissance before violent engagement. The main function of Eagle Vision still consists in the vertical locating and tagging elements of the world for future access. But its thematic articulation as a bird of prey further highlights that the stealth agent in *Assassin's Creed* is always on the hunt for fair game, "to be destroyed as soon as it can be made visible" (Chow 2006, 12). Moreover, following the discussion of distributed human-technology assemblages in chapter 4, the simulated collaboration of the stealth agent and their birds can be thought of in terms of a human-animal assemblage that distributes visual reconnaissance across two centers of perception. As the player makes their Hidden One infiltrate, say, a fort full of enemies, the eagle is circling overhead, ready to provide a vertical overview of the perceptual ecology that orders the space. Through this distributed surveillance, the gameplay creates the sense that the predatory stealth assemblage is slowly but surely closing in on its targets. Yet, unlike the human-technology assemblages seen in chapter 4, the distributed perception in *Assassin's Creed* lacks any world-making functions that would allow it to tactically circumvent or undo the adversarial relations that govern the game world. Thus, the overall gameplay experience that Senu and his successors create is that of a powerful surveillance matrix that has total access and captures everything of relevance.

Finally, the redesign of Eagle Vision evidently naturalizes digital surveillance. The inclusion of a literal eagle provides a retroactive fictional motivation for a surveillance mechanic that had been referred to as Eagle Vision all along but that had been explained in terms of the Animus machine's digital affordances rather than the simulated historical world itself. Given that the last three main titles in the franchise are set at the *beginning* of the *Assassin's Creed* timeline, the player is certainly meant to get a sense of belated recognition: So that's where Eagle Vision comes from—an actual eagle! In hindsight, the earlier all-seeing eye and minimaps can be seen as tech-enhanced versions of this original surveillance assemblage. In a sense, then, the introduction of the winged companions in the *Mythology* trilogy "renaturalizes" Eagle Vision. It pretends that the modes of digital surveillance that the series had implemented all along are those of the historical period itself.

The gameplay displaces and decouples predatory surveillance for total access from the science-fiction frame narrative around the digital surveillance of DNA-encoded memories. And instead of acknowledging the specific

logic of locating, tagging, and targeting as native to the digital, the redesign suggests that these precepts of digital surveillance are historically unspecific and were always already part of the world. And as the redesign of Eagle Vision naturalizes digital surveillance, it contributes to the "militarization of the aerial view" (Parks 2018, 12). In other words, the development of *Assassin's Creed*'s interface aesthetics is also a refashioning of historical realities according to the logic of digital culture. In addition to framing the access to historical locales, digital culture cloaks history in its own guise. Or, to focalize a notion that was introduced earlier, digital culture overcodes history.

8 Surveillance Stealth 2: Overcoding World History and the World as Blackbox

Chapter 7 addressed the relation between stealth gameplay, digital surveillance, and conspiracy thinking. This chapter will tie these reflections back to an understanding of world history, arguing that digital culture participates in an "overcoding" of world history that casts stealth and conspiracy as important, if not dominant, agents of historical change. This process results in mere tracings of the world according to a totalitarian master narrative, including reductive versions of history in which the world appears as a deceptive blackbox that needs to be comprehensively accessed and mapped (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 12). The argument will first return to *Assassin's Creed* before discussing the TV series *Turn: Washington's Spies* (AMC 2014–2017).

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari develop the notion of *overcoding* in the context of their discussion of stratifications in plateau 3, "The Geology of Morals" or "Who Does the Earth Think It Is?" (1987, 39–74). As with any process philosophy, theirs needs to explain how the world understood as a process or a manifold of events can lead to relative stability. And they explain the stabilization of matter into structured molar formations as processes of stratification. Stratifications are "statistical accumulations of regularized functions of many kinds which interlink to form a self-reproducing mechanism preserving and disseminating certain balances of forces" (Massumi 1992, 194). They distinguish between three different strata or processes of stratification: physical, organic, and linguistic. The present account will focus on the latter two because *Assassin's Creed*'s science fiction concerns the relation between DNA, an organic stratification, and its digital translation into the Animus machine's representational simulation, a process of linguistic stratification. The important thing to note regarding the organic stratification is that it develops by resonant transductions; that is, the organized transmission and propagation of functional relations from

a form of expression, DNA and its four nucleotides, to a form of content, amino acids (60). Here, the spatial "linearity of the nucleic sequence" ensures the autonomy of expression on the organic stratum because, while DNA may code for specific amino acids, it cannot fully determine the relations between these amino acids themselves or their relation to the exterior milieu. How these relations inform one another is a matter of transduction. This is how the "linearity [of organic stratification] takes us further in the direction of flat multiplicities, rather than unity" (59). In other words, the transductions on the organic stratum always carry quanta of freedom. DNA is *not* a "code-script" of biunivocal "structural correspondences . . . between the genes and the adult organism" (Ruyer 2016, 160). Linguistic stratification is qualitatively different from organic stratification because it relies on "temporal linearity" or "superlinearity," which allows it to create and arrange symbols into signifying series that are able to restratify all the other strata:

> The temporal linearity of language expression relates not only to a succession but to a formal synthesis of succession in which time constitutes a process of linear overcoding and engenders a phenomenon unknown on the other strata: *translation* [traduction], translatability, as opposed to the previous inductions and transductions. Translation should not be understood simply as the ability of one language to "represent" in some way the givens of another language, but beyond that as the ability of language, with its own givens on its own stratum, to represent all the other strata and thus achieve a scientific conception of the world. The scientific world (*Welt*, as opposed to the *Umwelt* of the animal) is the translation of all of the flows, particles, codes, and territorialities of the other strata into a sufficiently deterritorialized system of signs, in other words, into an overcoding specific to language. This property of *overcoding* or *superlinearity* explains why, in language, not only is expression independent of content, but form of expression is independent of substance: translation is possible because the same form can pass from one substance to another, which is not the case for the genetic code, for example, between RNA and DNA chains. We will see later on how this situation gives rise to certain imperialist pretentions on behalf of language. . . . (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 62; emphasis in original)

That the third stratum can overcode the other strata does not mean that it necessarily dominates them. First and foremost, language's superlinearity potentializes processes of stratification because it is both "modifiable from the outside" and "brings about modifications in the external world" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 60). Events that occur on the linguistic stratum—such as science (60)—are capable of producing analogous events on other strata—such as climate change, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity. Linguistic

stratification is thus "alloplastic" in a way that the physical and organic strata are not. This said, the third stratum also enables the formation of collective semiotic machines that develop an operational logic all their own, which is then imposed on other strata. Again, the semiotic machine called "science" is a good example. Once functionally integrated, such an abstract machine can then begin "to unfold, to stand to full height, producing an illusion exceeding all strata, even though the machine itself still belongs to a determinate stratum. This is, obviously, the illusion constitutive of man (who does man think he is?). This illusion derives from the overcoding immanent to language itself" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 63). The third stratum's tremendous powers of expression harbor the risk of stratifying into illusory discursive arrangements that mistake their logical consistency for universal applicability. Deleuze and Guattari mention "man" or humanism as one such illusion that has overcoded geological, organic, and linguistic stratifications across the planet. Similarly, "modernity" can be seen as an illusion, a story that we tell or told and that is never borne out by observable facts, but nonetheless restratifies the world in ways unforeseen by the ingrained illusion (Latour 1993).

The example under discussion here is the illusion of the "digital" as performed by digital media themselves. How does a game franchise like *Assassin's Creed* want us to imagine the operations of digital technology? And what understanding of history does this imaginary of the digital imply? The remainder of this chapter attempts to show that a certain illusion of the digital is invested in perpetuating, if not producing, biased overcodings of world history in terms of stealth and conspiracy because, simply put, they make history predictable according to a preestablished matrix. In other words, the longer traditions of conspiracy thinking laid out in the previous chapter add to the discursive illusion of the digital by providing it with an image of history as one linear sequence of events that results from the tension between a binary opposition (in this case, the Assassins and the Templars/Ancient Ones). That is also to say that, in a culture of digital surveillance, conspiracy thinking is not or not mainly "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age," as Frederic Jameson has suggested (1988, 356). Rather, conspiracy thinking is an important part of a larger discursive assemblage in which it helps displace the opacity of digital technology into the world itself, allowing digital technology to be imagined as that which makes this opacity accessible.

What Is History?

To explore how *Assassin's Creed* overcodes history, it is worth stating what "history" is—and is not—taken to mean in the present account. Most importantly, history is not understood as a retrospective discursive representation of historical events. That would be history as already written, or *historiography*. In the terms introduced throughout this book, *history* can be understood as the collective concretization of natural, social, political, cultural, and other processes. These processes prehend one another and grow together in a singular manner, *just so*. Traditionally, *historiography* looks at this process at the social scale of the nation and the temporal scale of transgenerational change, although this perspective has been challenged by many subaltern and everyday histories and other counterhistories. Importantly, however, historical process disregards any such scalar or perspectival distinctions; it happens across all of them. Historical process is transversal to its imaginable subsystems like culture, politics, and other areas. Geological events such as earthquakes may transduce into historical events in "politics" or "culture"—as they did in 1556, 1755, and 2011. A geopolitical catastrophe such as World War I, though conditioned by many sociopolitical factors, may be triggered by an assassination related to a relatively localized independence struggle. History is "contingent on circumstance," and "with each new circumstance, the process integrally rejigs" (Massumi 2015a, 155, 164). The smallest detail or the most unexpected asteroid from space may make all the difference.

Historiography struggles to account for the transversal complexity of historical process. This is partly due to its methodological individualism and interactionist approach, discussed in the previous chapter. As a result, historical events that are difficult to account for in those terms tend to disappear from conventional historical accounts. This seems to be the case for pandemics—at least until the next one hits (Honigsbaum 2018). Such oversight does not necessarily constitute an overcoding, so long as historiography's linguistic stratifications do not restratify the physical and organic strata of the world. But this has happened. Perhaps the most canonical example of historiography's overcoding of historical process is the modern concept of *progress*. Through the concept of progress, "history itself was redefined as [. . .] the steady, cumulative continuous expansion of human knowledge of, and power over, nature—knowledge and power that might be expected to result in a universal improvement in the conditions of human life" (Marx

1997, 970). And this concept did very much inflect the world's physical and organic stratifications, assigning predetermined roles to a variety of wordly beings. In the name of progress, human and nonhuman animals were slaughtered and vast swathes of the Earth were destroyed and ransacked. Indeed, the idea of progress was the "fulcrum of an all-encompassing secular world view" that is now transducing into a geological event called the Anthropocene by some (969). Atmosphere, biosphere, and lithosphere were and are bound to coevolve with—and under the overcoding pressure of—the noosphere. And the result may not exactly be "progress."

In light of this definition of history, the determinist view of history as progress turns out to be utterly "antihistorical":

> The most anti-historical thing one can do is demand that anything be historical in a determined way—that anything be anything determinate—for longer than a provisional freeze-frame, for longer than a rhythmic beat in a cycle of return and regeneration. If history were not always in the process of re-becoming itself in a way that brings all historical being integrally back into question, it wouldn't be what it is: the playing-out of all the world's relationality; the widest chaotic expression of the infinitely complex intensity of the most encompassing of unbounded fields (the earth or cosmos, understood as nature-culture at its broadest). The instant you assert an ideal of creative control, as soon as you try to impose a program in the traditional sense, you are working to stop the ongoing process of worldly self-expression that is [the] becoming of history. (Massumi 2019, 21)

Assassin's Creed's conspiratorial world building is antihistorical in this sense because it reduces each moment of history to a freeze-frame in a predetermined conspiracy narrative of an all-encompassing dualist conflict. The game franchise relies on an understanding of history as progress, which is ensured through the Assassins' repeated frustration of the Ancient Ones' power fantasies. That's why the Ancient Ones are "ancient": they resist the supposedly natural, that is, progressive course of history. And to do this, they invented the Animus machine. This triangulation between conspiracy, history, and technology is not coincidental. In *Assassin's Creed*, the overcoding of history is produced both *by* and *for* a certain illusion of digital technology whose algorithmic logic favors predictive calculation and, by the same token, struggles with the contingencies and emergent effects of historical process. Simply put, conspiracy thinking makes history seem predictable and thus subject to the algorithmic calculations of the digital. This argument is somewhat analogous to the one presented in chapter 4 with respect to *Watch Dog: Legion*'s dystopian vision of the cybernetic smart city. There, it was said that

smart-city discourses envision urban space as a quasi-autonomous system of technologically regulated flows of energy and information *so that* human interference or contestation appears less and less necessary, and ultimately expendable. If the smart city's cybernetic control of urban space allows it to eventually dispense with politics, *Assassin's Creed* similarly suggests that a historiography that makes common cause with conspiracy thinking and digital technology can rid itself of history. In other words, *Assassin's Creed* reinforces the old link between historiography and conspiracy thinking because it props up the overcoding "illusion" of the digital as the great "unveiler" of a constitutively opaque history. This illusion shall now be described in more detail.

As chapter 7 elaborated, the world-building of *Assassin's Creed* conceives of reality as a series of levels or layers: DNA on the level of organic matter, memory on the level of psychological experience, and the Animus machine on the level of digital technology. And the idea that drives the science fiction of *Assassin's Creed* is that the digital Animus machine also has the unique ability to *decode* the previous two layers, which have thus far refused to relinquish the data *encoded* in them. This understanding of reality as a layering of coded structures constitutes a first act of linguistic stratification. If the Animus re-presents information encoded in DNA that re-presents the lived experience of an ancestor, it is implied that these layers of existence are themselves structured by a univocal, symbolic code-script and relate to one another through correspondences that are also structured by that code.

This popular and intentionally vague notion of code does several things for *Assassin's Creed*'s worldview. First, it is a discursive move that enables the subsumption of all reality under the epistemic auspices of the digital. To know the world digitally is simply to convert data structured according to one symbolic script into another. Next, as the notion of code restratifies an understanding of historical reality as *conspiratorial*, it also carries with itself the connotation that encoded data is data withheld. As a result, the world appears as a structure that not only retains but actively hides information. So the overcoding of reality through the digital also functions to suggest that it is in fact the first two levels—DNA and memory—that constitute existential blackboxes. In such a world, there can be no certain immediate knowledge since our analog access to the world is by default insufficient and hence inadequate and unreliable. As a result, everything is suspect, even DNA. Such a secretive world *needs* to be comprehensively prehended and mediated by

the digital, which *must* fulfill this role by virtue of its already supposed and unique decoding and decryption prowess. In other words, it is *because of* this overcoding of reality in terms of both conspiracy and the digital that not only "nothing is true," but "everything is permitted," especially the imposition of code-based modes of converting the given world to accessible data. The Animus machine is thus of crucial necessity as a framing device: without this digital device, any reliable frame of reference for the unreliable world is lost. It is by means of this discreditation of reality itself that the overcoding illusion can cast the digital as the great unveiler and justify its reach into our suspect existences. Thus, the illusion of mediated conversions ultimately produces a remarkable discursive inversion, for it is usually the codes and procedures by which the digital prehends and processes the world that are blackboxed, due not only to intentional secrecy but also to their increasing complexity (Pasquale 2015, 6–7).

Yet such considerations regarding the Animus machine as a potential blackbox do not play a role in *Assassin's Creed*'s world-building. And as science fiction, the franchise can afford to avoid the technicalities of its central digital device. But leaving this blank space unexplored also makes it easier to facilitate the inversion that projects the opacity of proprietary software onto the world as a whole. In this context, conspiracy theory can be said to fulfill yet another function—both for *Assassin's Creed* in particular and digital culture more generally. Conspiracy theory provides a historical and political explanation for the world's untrustworthiness, and thus makes the process of overcoding disappear as such. Rather, the epistemic primacy of the digital can appear as a self-evident necessity in a world whose history is steeped in deception. In this way, the affinity between digital culture and conspiracy repeats and reinforces the Enlightenment idea that historical events are opaque not because they are complex but because they are the schemes of secret actors. It is here that the overcoding illusion of digital surveillance generalizes its aesthetic-epistemic configuration into conspiratorial metaphysics.

In *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, Luc Boltanski studies the implied metaphysics of detective and conspiracy fiction, suggesting that they perform a "splitting of reality between an apparent but false form and a concealed but real form" (2014, 142). Boltanski argues that this metaphysical investment is analogous to that of sociology and other modern modes of knowledge production. "Like detective fiction, and perhaps especially like spy fiction, sociology constantly tests the *reality of reality*, or, to put it another way, it

challenges *apparent* reality and seeks to reach a reality that is more hidden, more profound and more *real*" (2014, 32; emphasis in original). This project also indicates sociology's involvement in the formation of modern nation-states, a project that consisted in the construction of a supposedly shared, objective, and authoritative understanding of reality. Together with other leading knowledge practices of the time, such as statistics and political economy, sociology contributes to the construction of "reality as a totality, resting on a framework of formats, rules, procedures, knowledge and tests that purport to be generally applicable, a reality sustained by institutions that determine its shape" (16; translation modified).

In this context, the function of much conspiracy and spy fiction is twofold and consists in first "generating anxiety about the solidity and stability of reality" and then "quelling the anxiety that has been stirred up and restoring the reality that has been disturbed" (Boltanski 2014, 121, 122). The latter function is rarely fulfilled by state agents themselves, but nonetheless it relies on the many modern knowledge practices that undergird the reality of the state. In conventional conspiracy narratives, then, the protagonist's ultimate success at bringing the conspiracy to light and thus defeating it is tantamount to "eliminating the gap between lived reality and instituted [state-sanctioned] reality" (16). In conventional conspiracy narratives, then, the split between the two realities can and must be mended. Conspiracy appears as a powerful and concerted, yet incidental and ultimately failed, attempt at undoing an established order. It is the exception that confirms state rule.

By contrast, the overcoding illusion of the digital in *Assassin's Creed* turns the state of exception into the rule. The split between an apparent but false reality and a concealed but true reality is permanent. In fact, as a metaphysical condition, conspiracy is now constitutive of all reality as it is experienced and known. And this also has a number of implications for the ways in which more recent conspiracy narratives approach world history. First, conspiracy no longer unequivocally indicates the enemy. The enemy certainly is a conspirator, but so is the proud hero. Indeed, it may be temporarily impossible to know on which side of the conspiracy one is playing. This is cleverly demonstrated in *Assassin's Creed III*, which begins with a false protagonist: In the initial chapters, the player takes on the role of Haytham Kenway, believing him to be an Assassin who is trying to find an arcane artifact in North America, the Apple of Eden, before the Templars do. But then, in a plot twist

worthy of conspiracy fiction, it turns out that Haytham is in fact a British Templar and the game's main antagonist. After the avatar perspective subsequently switches to that of Haytham's son, Ratonhnhaké:ton or Connor, the player has been both the game's hero and its villain, who are indistinguishable by their conspiratorial designs. The conspirator-as-hero already made an appearance in chapter 2: *The Americans* is another example of spy fiction in which the ulterior goal is precisely *not* to eliminate false appearances and establish an objective and reliable sense of reality. On the contrary, the constant challenge for Elizabeth and Philip Jennings is to maintain and protect the split between their two identities. These are two instances of how digital culture reimagines the past, and it is worth noting that conspiracy is never a punctual disruption or distortion of reality as an otherwise stable reference frame. In *Assassin's Creed*'s science fiction of digital culture, the instability of conspirators' double lives has become an inescapable condition of precarious existence.

What is more, conspiracy often appears as a driving force behind historical change in this new type of conspiracy narrative. However, the relation between conspiracy and known historical events may be articulated in very different ways. In *Assassin's Creed*, official history importantly provides the settings, but political realities are mostly relegated to the sidelines. In *Assassin's Creed III*, for instance, the player learns that much of the American Revolution is the result of the Templars' violent attempt to retrieve the Apple of Eden and consolidate their power. Of course, the player helps the Assassins foil the Templars' nefarious plans, but it is nothing more than a battle victory in a forever war. In *Assassin's Creed*, historical events are always a result—and sometimes just a byproduct—of an eternal conflict between two conspiracies, that of the Ancient Ones/Templars/Abstergo and that of the Hidden Ones/Assassins. Again, this marginalization of political history in general is surely advantageous to the franchise's science-fiction world, with its increasingly fantastical and mythological leanings. In fact, the turn toward mythology may be a conscious strategy to avoid associating the fictional conspiracy with thorny historical facts. But the overcoding of history in digital culture may also, more modestly but just as suggestively, lead to a rearticulation of the connections between conspiracy and state politics for our time. This becomes clear in another recent fictional treatment of the American Revolution, the TV series *Turn: Washington's Spies*.

History as Espionage

Turn: Washington's Spies (AMC, 2014–2017) tells the story of the Culper Ring, a historical spy ring that worked closely with Washington's Continental Army. Over the course of four seasons, the series depicts how the ring's members, Abraham Woodhull, Benjamin Tallmadge, Caleb Brewster, and Anna Strong, misled the British colonizers and occupying army to gain intelligence and undermine colonial rule. *Turn* casts the group of spies as the story's heroes and draws a clear line from the Culper Ring to the success of the American Revolution. Conspiracy and espionage are thus marked as enablers of positive historical change: they contribute to the emancipation of the American people. While the Culper Ring certainly made an important contribution to American independence, it is worth noting that the series foregrounds the importance of actual conspiratorial activity over that of conspiracy *thinking,* which arguably played a much more important role in the formation of an American public sphere that resisted British rule. In this way, the series stays relatively close to historical fact, certainly compared to *Assassin's Creed*, and yet it manages to establish the figure of the stealthy conspirator as a nation-builder.

Turn is set mainly in the hamlet of Setauket, Long Island, where Abraham "Abe" Woodhull (Jamie Bell), Caleb Brewster (Daniel Henshall), and Anna Strong (Heather Lind) live inconspicuous lives as farmer, blacksmith, and innkeeper, respectively. Part of an emerging American public, their world is split in two when Setauket is occupied by the British army in 1776. The British immediately begin to reestablish their supposedly objective "state reality" and are ready to defend it by force. Throughout the series, the overwhelming force of the British occupation expresses itself in two modes. The bureaucratic violence of the colonial state is aptly rendered by Burn Gorman's Major Edmund Hewlett, whose professional stiffness does not quite manage to belie the delight that he takes in meting out his cruel justice in the name of the implanted law. The executive power of British occupation is portrayed in similarly frightening manner by Samuel Roukin's rendition of the historical John Graves Simcoe as a paranoid and utterly violent army captain who really cannot wait to kill in defense of the official reality. Confronted with this powerful and violent imposition, the Americans' perception of the truth is forced underground. It is in this context that Benjamin Tallmadge of the Continental Army enlists Abe, Caleb, and Anna into a conspiracy that will

come to be known as the Culper Ring. By and large, the plot revolves around the protagonists' illicit attempts at gathering intelligence and passing it on to General George Washington, who is introduced as a side character in the first season but becomes a staple in the following three. The British also run a formidable intelligence apparatus overseen by Major John André (JJ Feild). Over the course of four seasons, *Turn* slowly works toward the familiar conclusion: the American victory over the British troops.

This setup for the series already contains a shifted conception of conspiracy's role in history. As in *Assassin's Creed*, *Turn* presents revolutionary politics as two spy operations that are conspiring against each other. Consequently, reality is split twice over. The British insist on the objective and self-evident character of the official reality imposed by their state and vilify the concealed reality of the American traitors. It is this British perspective that largely follows the logic of spy fiction as laid out by Boltanski: an implanted state reality has been disrupted and must be reestablished—except, of course, that the British are the villains in this story. From the American perspective, it is the state of British rule that constitutes an apparent but false reality and must be supplanted by the true, albeit concealed, reality of American emancipation.

Once again, what stands out here is that conspiracy no longer has an antagonistic function. The series diverges from the historical path of conspiracy narratives as sketched by Boltanski when it acknowledges conspiracy, and especially espionage, as crucial weapons in the arsenal of both insurgents and counterinsurgency. Indeed, by its very focus on the Culper Ring, *Turn* foregrounds and emphasizes the importance of espionage in historical developments. This is noteworthy also because some of the spy ring's members insisted on taking their involvement to the grave, even after the successful revolution. The operative with the alias "Samuel Culper Jr.," for instance, was only identified in 1930 as the merchant Robert Townsend. In the post-revolution period of the eighteenth century, it was important to *deny* that the defeat of the British could be attributed to conspiracy and espionage. So when *Turn*—much like *The Americans* and *Assassin's Creed*—puts the intentionally marginal figure of the conspirator-spy center stage as a hero figure, it not only undermines the historical self-presentation of the revolutionaries but also upends the logic of twentieth-century espionage fiction as described by Boltanski.

Conventional conspiracy narratives of the twentieth century are preoccupied with defending state-sanctioned reality against its conspiring detractors.

If most secret agents of the twentieth century act on behalf of the state to undo an adversarial and deceptive claim on reality, this is also because by that time, nation-states had become established political entities. *Turn*'s setting in a revolutionary context is so interesting because it turns those certainties of the twentieth century upside down. In such a context, the apparent but false account of reality is precisely the one that the state itself expounds. Accordingly, the spies in *Turn* stand out from fictional conventions because it is their task to corrode the authoritative reality of the state. The series reminds its twenty-first-century viewer that conspiracy used to play a very different role in a very different geopolitical arrangement, especially in the late eighteenth century. In a way, then, this very recent TV series reaches back into history to stage a problematic moment of recognition between conspiracies of digital culture and those of nascent nation-states. The resonance between these two moments in history also brackets the dominant "modern" narrative of conspiracy and conspiracy thinking as enemies of the state. What is that recognition, that resonance between past and present?

In *Publicity's Secret*, Jodi Dean provides an insightful and original theorization of the relation between publicity and conspiracy in what she calls "technoculture" and is here referred to as "digital culture" (2002). Indeed, Dean argues that technoculture requires us to come to terms with the collective illusion of a normative public sphere as established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This illusion of "publicity" relates to the secret, conspiracy, and conspiracy thinking through a "constitutive exclusion" in various ways (17, 43). In a normative public sphere, secrecy and publicity are threats to one another. If a public sphere is meant to provide for and rely on transparent deliberation between self-representing citizens, then the secret undermines these very principles of publicity. As a result, publicity must threaten to undo the secret by exposing it. This includes conspiracy understood as organized secrecy. By being normatively excluded, secrecy and conspiracy thus help constitute publicity because the "suspicion that something has been withheld, that the information needed for judging properly is hidden and needs to be exposed, sustains this system" (22). In this argument, the terms "publicity" and "public sphere" operate analogously to the notion of state reality in Boltanski's account: according to the normative illusion, the reality of the state and the public sphere in which that reality is represented must continuously be defended against their secretive detractors. Conspiracy thinking, too, is excluded to constitute publicity and,

even more so, to protect the boundaries of acceptable public speech. In the twentieth-century mindset, "those who think in terms of conspiracy constitute a danger to democracy. . . . [Conspiracy theory] plays an integral role in maintaining the fantasy of the reliable center, the public, the 'we' recognized and accepted by mainstream American political science. It does this in part by occupying the position of that which has to be excluded if the center is to hold" (58). And this conceptual exclusion of conspiracy thinking also implies a third, pragmatic exclusion from public discourse of those who are not deemed capable of adequate causal ratiocination. The modern illusion of publicity "depended on not having everyone judge and on disavowing that this was a constitutive exclusion" (43). In this way, the public sphere is constituted by excluding secrecy/conspiracy, conspiracy thinking, and a large segment of the population that is "supposed to believe" rather than "know," as Dean puts it (17). Once again, most conspiracy and espionage narratives of the twentieth century perform this discursive logic to defend publicity and the state reality that it supports.

On the backdrop of this assessment, Dean makes two points that are relevant to the present argument. First, this discursive illusion marginalizes the productive role of both conspiracy and conspiracy theory in the formation of modern nation-states. And, second, the productive force of conspiracy thinking returns with a vengeance in technoculture. By conjugating these two points with *Turn*'s twisted take on them, the remainder of this chapter will try to capture the role that conspiratorial stealth plays in digital culture's view of history more generally.

To establish her alternative view of conspiracy theory's productive functions, Dean also returns to the War of Independence and shows that the Americans were able to consolidate an independent public sphere in favor of secession by disseminating theories of the British Crown's depraved conspiracies against their subjects in the colonies. In his draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson states that "the history of his present majesty is a history of unremitting injuries and usurpations," but these abuses are evoked in the general rather than named in all their particularities ("Jefferson's 'Original Rough Draught'"). In public discourse, however, the speculations regarding the Crown's misdeeds ranged far and wide: "The recounting of this history, the charges leveled at the king, includes claims that he refused to pass laws, dissolved representative houses, obstructed the administration of justice, 'plundered our seas,' 'ravaged our coasts,' 'burnt

our towns,' excited domestic insurrections, and endeavored to bring on the 'inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian savages.' The grievances were not just statements of fact introduced to identify specific crimes and injuries. They were part of a political strategy. They were evidence of a conspiracy" (Dean 2002, 54). What is more, the supposition and speculation regarding the abusive overreaches of the king's arcane power were seen as worthy endeavors beholden to the Enlightenment ideals of reason and causality. These speculations relied on what Dean refers to as the "Whig conception of history" which, following Link and Boltanski, can be identified as an interactionist account of history: "That events could be scientifically analyzed in terms of *patterns* of meaningful, *intentional actions* gave a logic to the colonists' demands. It made them, in a word, rational" (Dean 2002, 56; emphasis added). But here, instead of accounting for a mass phenomenon in interactionist terms (see chapter 7), conspiracy theory mobilizes interactionist thinking to produce a mass movement in the first place. "For the colonists, conspiracy theory—a theory that disclosed hidden links among a variety of political acts and concluded that such interconnections were evidence of tyrannical designs—helped produce an American public" and motivate it to emancipate itself (Dean 2002, 57).

In light of this, it becomes clear that *Turn* returns to the American Revolution not to give a fictional account of the historical role of conspiracy theory, but to fold conspiracy and conspiracy thinking into one another. As historical fiction, the series puts the emphasis not so much on conspiracy thinking as on conspiracy itself. Instead of showing Americans *ascribing* conspiracies to the British, the series takes the supposed conspiratorial activities of the British at face value and portrays them as fictionalized fact. In a sense, then, the series *Turn* simply repeats the "conspiracy thinking" that was so "central to the founding of the United States" some 240 years later and even vindicates it because, as it turns out in *Turn*, the British Crown and its representatives take every opportunity to scheme against their reluctant subjects, planting moles and setting traps wherever they can (55). And the main focus of the series is the conspiratorial actions of the Americans themselves. That political power operates in stealth is never in question in the series. In fact, *Turn* wants so much for the American Revolution to be the achievement of conspiracy that it, too, overdetermines history.

This overdetermining impulse can once again be most clearly observed in *Turn*'s use of spy technology, which is to a considerable extent anachronistic.

It should be noted that the series presents a number of historically accurate spy techniques, such as the Cardan (or Cardano) grille, the original Culper Spy Code book, and the impressive Turtle, the "world's first combat submarine" ("The Submarine Turtle" 2017). Beyond that, the series foregrounds a number of spy techniques that were either much older and not used during the Revolutionary War or invented only afterward. For example, American revolutionaries very much used invisible inks, or "sympathetic stains," as they were then called. James Jay, brother of John Jay, "created a chemical solution out of tannic acid to be used as an invisible ink, and supplied quantities of the stain to the colonists" ("Spy Techniques"). But *Turn* has a curious obsession with an invisible ink that leaves secret messages beneath the shells of hard-boiled eggs, a method that was developed in the fifteenth century by the Italian Giovanni Porta and, according to record, was never used during the Revolutionary War (Nagy 2011, 7). This technique is foregrounded nonetheless due to its visual impact, which supports *Turn*'s televisual project of overcoding history in terms of stealth. Chicken eggs are a most quotidian domestic staple food, utterly recognizable and seemingly innocuous. And yet, even they can be caught in a web of subterfuge.

When *Turn* repeatedly showcases the "egg method" it is to suggest that, in an arcane world, the most vital information can be hidden in the most anodyne quotidian objects and in the smallest of interstices, between an egg white and its shell. This view of the world-as-blackbox is once again complemented with audiovisual tropes suggesting that the best means to uncover the truth are technological. In the episode "Sealed Fate," the historical spymaster Nathaniel Sackett claims to have invented nothing less than a prototype of a lie detector, preceding the earliest recorded attempts at creating so-called polygraphs by about a century. In *Turn*, the device is, perhaps expectedly, used to extract information from a collaborator of the British. In this capacity, the anachronistic lie detector serves two historically questionable functions. First, the devices' apparent evidentiary function reinforces the idea that technology can access withheld truths. The British collaborator is truly terrified by this idea. Instilling such terror constitutes the second function of the lie detector. Sackett is aware that the device may not actually be able to tell truth from lie. It is, more immediately, a device of psychological torture that facilitates the extraction of information.

Turn contains several scenes in which various forms of torture—including what one might call proto-waterboarding—are used to obtain intelligence.

This, too, is historically unlikely, as "torture for the sake of gaining information certainly occurred during the war, but was far less common than torture as a form of punishment" (Jones 2014). The series thus shifts the emphasis from the dominant historical use of torture to a marginal use to support its view of the Revolutionary War as a war of conspiracy and counterintelligence. Like *Assassin's Creed*, then, *Turn* mobilizes speculative technologies to unveil the willful secrecy of a largely deceptive world. The series casts both conspiracy and technology as historical forces and makes them work in a complementary manner to create what Dean calls a continuous "dynamic of concealment and revelation" (45). History is a matter of what conspiracy conceals and/or what technology reveals. Although *Turn* does not include digital technology as such, its discursive triangulation of history, conspiracy, and technology is strikingly similar to that observed in *Assassin's Creed* and serves to overcode history in terms of both conspiracy and solutionist technology.

Of course, actual conspiracies did very much play an important role in the formation of modern nation-states. But here, too, *Turn* diverges from conventional historical accounts. Following Reinhart Koselleck's seminal *Critique and Crisis*, Dean discusses secret lodges like those of the Freemasons as examples of conspiracies that helped form bourgeois public spheres by providing secret spaces in which political views that opposed the monarch's absolute power could be safely voiced (2002, 25–26). Here, the conspiracy consists in associating people into a parallel social reality in which the repressive rules of an absolutist regime are suspended. As a result, it is possible to safely articulate a radical alternative to the present political order from within that order. *Turn*'s Culper Ring resembles these secret lodges in that it helps conceive and bring about a radically different sociopolitical order. But it significantly diverges from them because it does not portray the formation of a public consciousness in secret; the series assumes that such a consciousness exists as a fait accompli: Most Americans in the series are certain of their collective desire to secede. And instead of a secret society that pursues the possibility of free expression without the risk of violent conflict, the conspiracy in *Turn* is a spy operation actively engaged in warfare. In this way, *Turn* foregrounds the offensive conspiracy-of-espionage over the defensive conspiracy-of-secret-societies.

Given the historical events portrayed in the series, that should not surprise. After all, the Culper Ring did exist and conduct a spy operation against

the British army. However, the question is how historical fiction reconstructs such events and how that discursive construction evaluates such historical fact for the present. Looked at from this angle, it becomes clear that *Turn* can tell its story only by reengineering the narrative conventions of spy fiction, which also results in a reevaluation of conspiracy itself. The series imports the belligerent orientation of conspiracy from twentieth-century spy fiction, where conspiracy is well established as an active attempt at destroying the state but retains this element only to turn its ethical valence upside down.

Instead of being the antagonistic threat that needs to be suppressed, the conspiracy against the state is now the virtuous undertaking of the protagonists. And so important features of the conventional villainous conspirator have to be transferred onto the revolutionary hero. *Turn* explicitly performs its abandonment of the conventional vilification of counterstate conspirators, for example by putting this convention in the mouth of the discredited British enemies. As the officers of the imperial army, who themselves have a formidable counterintelligence network in place, repeatedly denounce espionage, their denunciations not only sound increasingly hypocritical but also honorific. The vilification by none other than the villains becomes a badge of honor for the protagonists. To ensure this effect, the British admonitions against conspiracy are mixed with discourses that the contemporary audience can readily recognize as reprehensible and vile, such as homophobia. Consider a scene from the second episode of *Turn*, in which Robert Rogers, the historical leader of the "Rogers' Rangers" who supported the British, associates the abjection of espionage with that of sodomy. Rogers finds out that the murder of a British captain was committed by his same-sex lover, John Robeson. Instead of duly reporting Robeson to the authorities, Rogers uses this knowledge to blackmail Robeson into spying for him and report on any revolutionary activities in town. Rogers threatens Robeson in a whispered growl: "There's something rotten in Setauket, but it ain't you. Oh, you're an aberration, one that could be of use, now that we know your shame. . . . You keep your eyes open and your trap shut and you look and you listen and you will sniff out the rot in this place while I'm away. See, I'm going to keep you alive, Robeson, as the lowest form of life there is, lower than a sodomite or a serpent's belly: a spy. My spy" (Silverstein and Morgan 2014). Here, *Turn* repeats a trope of twentieth-century spy fiction, as well as popular Cold War discourse, for instance surrounding the Cambridge circle of spies around Anthony Blunt, who was, not incidentally, a champion of the baroque (Carter

2001, 177). Namely, the spy-conspirator is a moral degenerate not only for betraying their stated allegiance and their cowardly refusal to fight out in the open, but also by virtue of their perverse sexuality. But in *Turn*, this formerly authoritative trope rots in the mouth of the British collaborator and disintegrates from its conventional moralistic valuation. The homosexual and spy are abject only in the eyes of the utterly conservative, reactionary Rogers, and only because the latter chooses to abject Robeson by blackmailing him with social stigma. This is to make clear to the audience that Rogers's view, which is the conventional view of twentieth-century spy fiction, fails to occupy any moral high ground in the twenty-first-century view of espionage and history. Ultimately, then, Robeson's subjection to homophobic violence lends further support to American spy activities. One could say that it vaguely implies a conspiracy-friendly homonationalism (Puar 2007). (There will be more on the queerness of stealth in chapter 9.)

This, then, is how *Turn* rearticulates narrative conventions and historical fact to produce a positive image of conspiracy's supposedly dominant role in history: It overturns the moral valence implied in conventional "modern" spy fiction and inserts it into a historical setting in which conspiracy thinking was arguably of greater historical importance than conspiracy itself and the conspiracy of secret societies was more important than the conspiracy of espionage. The foregrounding of a spy-conspiracy emphasizes its historical importance and backgrounds the historical significance of force-on-force warfare and of geopolitical arrangements such as the French support for American independence. This project is further supported through the depiction of anachronistic and speculative spy technology that both projects secrecy into the world and claims to reveal the truth. As a result, the American Revolution can appear as an historical event whose success depended on courageous, stealthy conspirators. This unabashed affirmation of counterstate conspiracy as a productive historical force makes *Turn* another instance of digital culture's overcoding of world history in terms of conspiracy and stealth.

Jodi Dean wouldn't be surprised. In *Publicity's Secret*, she presciently suggested that conspiracy theory would return with a vengeance under the conditions established by technoculture. This is the second point that was invoked earlier and shall now be explicated in the guise of a conclusion. For Dean, publicity is a normative ideology built on the constitutive exclusion of the secret, conspiracy thinking, and a sizable portion of the nonelite public.

This ideology comes under pressure in an age of digital information glut. Digital media prehend and present a vast amount of the world's data. At the same time, digital modes of communication like social media have allowed more people to engage in public discourse. The developments have reached a point at which the addition of new facts and data can no longer provide the ground for rational deliberation toward consensus. Under such conditions, publicity "turns"—like a human bitten by a zombie—into its monstrous other: conspiracy thinking:

> One might think that the possibility of limitless information would help realize the claims of a democratic public sphere. If those who participate in the "conversation" have an abundance of data at their disposal, shouldn't they be able to make more informed decisions? Some versions of public deliberation stipulate that nothing be omitted from consideration, that participants have access to all relevant information. Yet the conspiracy rhetoric pervading current assessments of the Internet links precisely this vision of an end to ignorance, secrecy, and the rule of expert knowledge that animates the ideal of a public sphere with gullibility, seduction, and widespread irrationality. *The very prevalence of information and inclusion of multiple voices claimed on behalf of democratic discourse morphs into the undecideability of truth claims and the fear that "all kinds of people" will enter the conversation.* (Dean 2002, 72; emphasis added)

In digital culture, there is too much contradictory information for one account of reality to be able to retain unquestioned authority. This fundamentally undermines all claims to objective representation, including the reality of the state. When various perspectives offer concurring rational explanations for the same state of affairs, somebody has got to be lying. But who can tell the conspiring liar from the "honest citizen"? The answer is probably that everyone *thinks* they can, for while digital culture erodes an objective, impersonal account of reality, it insists on the importance of revealing the facts behind the lies—not for the sake of publicity, but for the sake of media consumption. "Getting at the secret, uncovering the truth behind the scenes of publicity's staging, supports media culture's drive for information" (Dean 2002, 39). Digital media benefit from publicity's turn to conspiracy thinking because the search for the truth without a reliable benchmark for truthfulness allows media to stage a perennial "dynamic of concealment and revelation" (45). Digital culture now engages in the precisely the kind of "hyperactive semiosis" that Mark Fenster attributed to conspiracy thinking (2008, 95). And while media culture claims to be engaging the audience in

the critical exercise of public deliberation, it ends up enthralling its public in the continued consumption of the latest revealing content.

This dynamic of overcoding in terms of stealth is perhaps illustrated most clearly by *Assassin's Creed*, which uses conspiracy theory as a world-building tool for a potentially infinite franchise. As players of *Assassin's Creed*, we are continuously sniffing out yet another aspect of a transhistorical global conspiracy. Likewise, *Turn* stages an encounter between two spy operations that continuously attempt to track, detect, and reveal one another. This dynamic repeats some of the core prehensive operations of digital technology in its dominant commercialized guise. But, as this argument has tried to demonstrate, this perceptual dynamic already implies a view of political action, even at a historical scale, which first assumes that political acts take place in secrecy and then valorizes stealth as a legitimate mode of surveilling and accessing targets. Political action and historical change are reduced to the continuous double movement of hiding and revealing true intent. It is this outlook on politics as well that the player of *Assassin's Creed* performs through the gameplay of surveillance stealth. Similarly, as viewers of *Turn*, we are encouraged to interpret history as a matter of conspiracy and espionage, and thus to affirm the historical importance of secrecy and stealth. Although fictional, these stealth fantasies can inflect collective cultural understandings of the world and its history. In this particular case, stealth—understood as a cultural expression of digital culture—functions to split the historical and contemporary world in two, insinuating that the world is fundamentally false and untrustworthy. More generally, this *attribution* of stealth as conspiratorial intent to an unknown or only vaguely known "other" can be seen as a discursive analog of the "stealth talk" disseminated by President Donald Trump's administration (as discussed in the introduction). These discursive arrangements between stealth, surveillance, and conspiracy leave us with a view in which the world-as-blackbox is always in need of another counterinsurgent hack, in need of continued aesthetic-epistemic mastery by all digital means necessary.

Following the argument of the last two chapters, all this can happen because the perceptual and operational logic of stealth gives rise to and is subsumed under the representational logic of conspiracy and surveillance. As was shown with respect to *Assassin's Creed*, this subsumption also leads to a reduction of stealth's *operational* logic to acts of tracking-and-targeting for the purposes of elimination, with very little room for generative world-making.

This is one of digital culture's master narratives, one representational logic of stealth. But this needn't be so. Admittedly, stories of conspiratorial abuses of power are widespread in video game narratives. But instead of overdetermining the gameplay activity, they can (and mostly do) serve as a formulaic background on which more critical insurgent moves and more creative stealth shenanigans can be launched. These ideas will be the focus of the final two chapters of this book.

9 Magical Stealth: Queering Sourcery and Relational Ethics in *Dishonored*

Chapters 7 and 8 focused on representations of "surveillance stealth," which explain the power of stealth through technological fantasies. In *Assassin's Creed*, that power fantasy manifests as the Animus machine. In *Turn*, it is the panoply of anachronistic spy gadgetry deployed by the Culper Ring. But stealth does not always draw its figurative power from technology. In many stealth games, the avatar's powers to become imperceptible are explained through magic. This *magical stealth* is the focus of this chapter because the alternative figuration of stealth through magic indicates not only a different representational function, but also a different understanding of stealth as a praxis of digital culture. To demonstrate this, this chapter provides a close engagement with *Dishonored*, a series of immersive sims that enable and arguably favor stealth gameplay (Bethesda 2012–2017). In each of the three main games of the *Dishonored* series, the player's avatar is given magical abilities or artifacts to face an overwhelmingly hostile environment. At the push of a few buttons, for instance, the player can "blink" or instantly move through space across a certain distance, temporarily take on another character's appearance, slow down or even stop time, and magically link enemies so that what happens to one of them happens to all of them. Much as in *Assassin's Creed*, *Dishonored*'s representational logic of magic, this chapter argues, is informed by a particular understanding and practice of digital culture. And once again, the link between the digital and its representational analog—magic, in this case—are linked through and in the gameplay of stealth.

The analogy between coding—or software or algorithms—and magic has been observed many times (see, more recently, Chun 2011 and Finn 2017). Following Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, magic, or what she calls "sourcery," plays such a popular role in imaginaries of the digital because it expresses

a desire at the heart of digital culture: the "conflation of instruction with result" (2011, 29). Magic spells are series of symbolic signs that are believed to produce an essential or material change in reality. Similarly, software supposedly enables its users to produce reality through the execution of code. The imagined processual logics of magic and software are thus analogous to the extent that a conventionalized symbolic input seems to instantly produce a desired effect. This imaginary of the digital relies on the "erasure of the vicissitudes of execution" (53): in order for the analogy with magic to work, the actual work of executing the code that produces the output needs to be obfuscated, blackboxed. And in turn, the analogy with magic buttresses the logic of blackboxing as it turns code into the arcane knowledge of a select initiated few, the "priesthood of programming" (46). Chun shows that this narrative of code as magic and programmers as wizards acts as a convenient myth that distracts from the twin facts that code is a complex language of command and that, for this reason, *access to* code is controlled through the implementation of structured programming and automation. This explains why programming is "both mastery and hell": the programmer wields a power, the exercise of which is thwarted, if not entirely controlled, by the legal codes governing digital technologies, such as intellectual property and copyrights (41).

This chapter takes Chun's argument as a starting point to suggest that *Dishonored*'s gameplay of magical stealth *dramatizes* the software-magic analogy. The series builds a steampunk world that is organized by both magic and its general prohibition. Magic is officially outlawed and highly securitized in the *Dishonored* series. The playable avatars of the games are exceptional and salient renegades—a betrayed queen's bodyguard, an ousted queen, a wanted assassin—who are marked by a metaphysical being called the Outsider and thus endowed with the arcane powers of magic. They must use these magical powers to transform or inform a hostile world, ideally in a peaceful manner. At least in part, then, *Dishonored* provides a representational analog of the "magical world of the hacker," whose "mastery" of code enables their stealthy powers of obfuscation and intrusion and allows them to "hack the system" (48–49). It is therefore all the more remarkable that by the end of the series, informing the world toward peace means nothing less than undoing the Outsider, the metaphysical being that grants magic and upon which the world-building and gameplay of the *Dishonored* series rests. An entire world logic must come to an end. But this does not mean the end of magic in the

world of *Dishonored*. The point is not to abolish magic, but abolish the mythical entity that controls it. At the end of *Death of the Outsider*, the last title in the series, the protagonist Billie Lurk states: "The outsider is no more, and with that, the world will change in ways none of us can know. But the Void is still there, echoing just beyond what you can see. *And there's no one left to say who will and won't be touched by its magic*" (emphasis added). *Dishonored*'s world narrative is the undoing of a myth. According to the argument, which reads digital culture back into this magical world, *Dishonored* dramatizes the software-magic analogy mainly to undo our belief in this powerful analogy and its hold on our imaginary.

The argument further suggests that *Dishonored* articulates this project through a gameplay aesthetic that can be qualified as queer. For Chun, too, the "point is not to break free from [the] sourcery" invoked here (2011, 20). Rather, it is to free code from its capitalist enclosure and securitization to exploit its "unexpected possibilities" and produce "surprisingly 'deviant' pleasures" (20). In *Dishonored*, unexpected divergences and queer pleasures can be experienced in the gameplay. While *Dishonored*'s narrative ultimately does break free from the magic that organizes its world, the argument will foreground three generative aspects of the gameplay: First, the gameplay of magical stealth highlights the reticular relationality of the world. Second, it emphasizes the possibility of using magical stealth to create *divergent* series of events within the game, and thus to queer the software's "programmed vision." And this, in turn, stresses the need for a practical, event-based ethics for the digital. If one does not know how a magic spell transfigures reality or how software executes an input to produce a desired output, one can nonetheless attend to the many minor and major experiential effects that one's magical actions have on the surrounding world. In this way, the magical stealth of *Dishonored* implies an ethics of care and the possibility of peace.

Informing Metaphysics: The Void, the Outsider, and Magic

The *Dishonored* series is set in the fictional steampunk world called the Empire of the Isles. The three main titles of the series are set in the industrial port cities of the nineteenth century of the empire's common era. But to understand *Dishonored*'s metaphysics of magic, it is important to consider the empire's ancient history and, in particular, the world-building role of the Outsider. The fictional world of *Dishonored* has an alternate dimension and

potential afterlife realm called the Void, which, according to lead developer Harvey Smith, "hungers for a representational, godlike entity . . . The Void sometimes has a divine entity, and sometimes does not. Some last for thousands of years. Sometimes the gap between them lasts as long. Each takes on the attributes of the time or process that made it" ("The Void" 2023). During the events of the games, the divine occupant of the Void is the Outsider. He was brought to the Void some 4,000 years earlier as a sacrifice. A street urchin at the time, he is abducted by a cult called the Envisioned and brought to the Void's Ritual Hold, where he is tied to an altar. In a ritual that involves cutting the victim's throat and erasing the memory of his name, the street urchin partially merges with the Void to become the Outsider, a "being of insatiable curiosity about what people do when given power over others" ("The Outsider"). He therefore bestows magic on individuals whom he considers to be of particular interest—about whom more in a moment. First, an initial interpretation of the Outsider is in order. In her impressive analysis of *Dishonored 2*, Hazel Monforton proposes that the Outsider is a *pharmakos* or "scapegoat":

> As a sacrificial victim pushed to the margins of society and reviled by the community that rejects him, [the Outsider] assumes the role of the "pharmakos." "Pharmakon" is an Ancient Greek social ritual of catharsis, cleansing, and sacrifice. The victims, "pharmakoi," were required whenever a threat, real or imagined, destabilized the borders and hierarchies of a community to the point of crisis. . . . The pharmakos is therefore granted enormous power by the community: he has the means to both destroy it and save it. It is no accident that the root word, "pharma," means both "poison" and "cure". . . . The Outsider is not a tempter, sowing discord and offering power to bring people away from a righteous or compassionate path. Neither are his machinations meant to trick us into committing acts of chaos for a bored, eldritch boy-god to watch with amused delight. Ultimately, he wants to see power used justly rather than vengefully. Your violence only cements his cynicism; the Void might be chaotic, but the Outsider is not. (Monforton 2016)

Giorgio Agamben has developed Derrida's figure of the *pharmakos* into that of the *Homo sacer*, a sacrificial figure reduced to "bare life" for the purpose of protecting the "good life" of the polis (see Derrida 1981 and Agamben 1998). In the world of *Dishonored*, the Outsider is scapegoated and subjected to an act of sacrificial violence that both abjects and exhalts him to become the protector of the boundary between life as sanctioned by social codes and the more "simple natural [and magical] life" that lies beyond social order (Agamben 1998, 2). The insight to draw from a reading of the Outsider as

pharmakos or *Homo sacer* is that the foundation of a boundary that protects an "inside" from a presumed "outside" requires the violent construction of a scapegoat within the community that must then be forcefully expulsed from that community. In this sense, the Outsider is included in the cosmology of *Dishonored* through his exclusion, or what Agamben calls an "inclusive exclusion" (8). And this inclusive exclusion—the expulsion of the impure figure that affirms the outside of magic within—serves to protect the mutual exclusion of the inside and outside. The important point to mention here is that the project to eliminate the Outsider is also a *refusal* of the metaphysics that produces him in the first place. The peaceful undoing in *Death of the Outsider* is a performative rejection of a cosmology that requires the figure of the *Homo sacer*, a worldview that distinguishes between "bare" and "good life" to begin with. Formulated in the process vocabulary adopted in this book, the figure of the Outsider is the cosmic act of transduction that allows for the integration of various other systemic tensions. Indeed, the banishing of the Outsider and the restricted access to magic allow the Empire of the isles to develop into a recognizably modern and complex industrial society whose powers are divided across a monarchic state headed by the Kaldwin dynasty, organized religion in the form of the Abbey of the Everyman, a lively industry fueled by whale oil and various sects and groups with ambitions for the throne or other positions of power. The exclusionary exaltation of magic in *Dishonored* informs worldly power differentials and reorganizes them into a seemingly functional whole, similar to the way in which the restriction of access to code through structured programming and automation enabled the powerful digital enclosures of our time (Chun 2011, 36–42). But the whole is rather dysfunctional from the perspective of those excluded and oppressed. So on this backdrop of world-building, *Dishonored* begins its narrative endeavor to reintegrate magic into the world, its search for a transduction of reality toward peace.

The first two main titles of the *Dishonored* series revolve around a battle for the throne. In the first installment, Empress Jessamine Kaldwin is assassinated, her throne usurped by the power-hungry Lord Regent, and the entire royal guard turned against anyone loyal to the late empress. As a result, the empress's royal protector—and playable character of *Dishonored*—Corvo Atano is arrested and their daughter, Emily Kaldwin, heiress to the throne, is kidnapped. Corvo Atano, controlled by the player, manages to escape and must now stealthily navigate a tight surveillance apparatus to vanquish the

Lord Regent and install Emily Kaldwin as the rightful empress. The basic plot of *Dishonored 2* is rather similar, with Delilah Copperspoon serving as an alternative villain who usurps the throne of the now-adult Emily Kaldwin. One notable difference, both in terms of representation and gameplay, consists in the fact that the player can now choose between playing the game as Corvo Atano or Emily Kaldwin herself. Their shared goal is to regain the throne and protect their monarchy. Initially, then, this is not a very queer project, as Eli Dobromylskyj has shown (2019). In these two titles, Billie Lurk, a queer black woman voiced by Rosario Dawson, figures as a secondary (nonplayable) character whose loyalties vary starkly due to her marginalized status. "Unlike Corvo, [whose] swordsmanship earned him the royal protector position, [Billie] has moved laterally, rather than up the social ladder: from starving orphan, to thief, to assassin—not for any noble end, but for basic survival" (Cole 2017). Trying to escape abuse and sex work as a child, young Billie Lurk ultimately becomes an assassin, an occupation that soon makes her an outcast and pariah, a status that she'll keep throughout the series. In *Dishonored 2*, she is forced to live in hiding as Meagan Foster on her ship *The Dreadful Whale*, where she deals in contraband during the day and wistfully dreams of her lost lover, Deirdre, at night. Her old identity is revealed to the player when Billie/Meagan is involved in a magical time loop, about which more in a moment. In *Death of the Outsider*, the final title in the series, the player for the first time controls Billie in her quest to destroy the Outsider.

All these playable characters are "marked" by the Outsider, which allows them to harness the power of magic runes. But their projects are rather different. In *Dishonored* and *Dishonored 2*, Corvo and Emily initially hold positions of authority that are then usurped by an impostor-king and queen, respectively. They are persona non grata only because a system of law enforcement—animated by enemy AI—that was previously in their power has been turned against them. Their goal is simply to regain control over that system; its "programming" can remain unchanged. The usurpation of their throne is a mere error in the system that can be corrected. So long as they have a position of power to return to, so long as they can regain what has been refused, the deposed royals can afford to care little for the procedural ways of their world and the violent exclusions that they require. But Billie Lurk has no such prospect of refuge in this society, this world. Her relative social invisibility as a marginalized, dispossessed individual and her hypervisibility as a criminal—made plain in the many "Wanted!" posters placarded around the

game world—are not the result of a system error, but of the system's protocol. Billie Lurk therefore questions the powers that be more fundamentally. She is in "refusal of what has been refused," so much so that she intends to upend the very metaphysics of her world by eliminating the Outsider (Harney and Moten 2013, 96). In *Death of the Outsider*, it becomes clear that stealth is not only a way of surreptitiously sneaking through a world full of danger and achieving one's goals by subterfuge rather than open confrontation. Magical stealth allows Billie Lurk to actively and systematically "refuse[] the terms of visibility imposed on" her (Hartman 2020, 18), to tactically occupy the spaces that elude surveillance and control, the interstices within her hostile surroundings, an outside that is immanent to the oppressive world that she inhabits.

The Gameplay Design of Magical Stealth

Dishonored can be described as a first-person stealth action-adventure. In terms of gameplay design, however, the series belongs, strictly speaking, to the genre of immersive simulations or "immersive sims." Immersive sims are somewhat different from the sandbox games analyzed in previous chapters. Sandboxes usually focus on spatial openness filled with series of similar challenges across the world map. They therefore foreground extensive exploration and gradual improvement through intermittent upgrading and challenge increases to give the repetitiveness of gameplay activity a purpose within the game. Immersive sims, by contrast, are usually much smaller games with a limited set of missions set in a clearly delimited space or level. For instance, *Dishonored* and *Dishonored 2* each have "only" ten main missions, some of which are even set in the same space or level (but usually after that space has been transformed by the events of the story and thus requires an alternative approach). What they lack in expansiveness, immersive sims make up for in density. Their interfaces simulate complex worlds that operate a functional system that is composed of several interlocking subsystems and open to the contingencies of player input. Depending on the game, the interlocking subsystems can include the physics of the game world, which might specify rules concerning gravity and fall damage or regulate the distance across which the avatar can be heard and seen by enemy AI. Enemy AI, in turn, is shorthand for procedural rules governing the number, strength, and behavior of in-game enemies. In addition to these elements, the *Dishonored* series features

a large cast of nonplayable characters (NPCs), who aren't enemies and with whom the player can choose to interact.

Regarding mission tasks, immersive sims usually give their players a fairly straightforward and general goal without providing any further instructions on how to achieve it. But achieving this goal is all the more difficult due to the complex obstacles formulated by the interlocking subsystems. The player is thus encouraged to immerse themselves in the game as a rule-based system of subsystems and use their gameplay affordances to compose tweaks and divergences in the subsystems, which will then produce the desired shift in the system as a whole. "The core tenet of immersive sim design is 'systemic play'" (McKeand 2022, 24). This combination of complexity and openness is particularly conducive to moments of emergent gameplay; that is, singular moments that use the software affordances to compose highly contingent solutions, solutions that work because all the procedures in the game's rule systems came together in just that moment and in just that unpredictably favorable manner. This pursuit of "emergent gameplay resulting from interconnected systems" also fosters "divergent playstyles" (Backe 2022). This is where *Dishonored*'s gameplay subsystems come into play: combat, stealth, and magic. All missions can be accomplished in various ways: The player can choose to confront all enemy AI in open combat, relying on an arsenal that includes a pistol, a folding blade, a crossbow with various arrow types, and hand grenades. Or the player can choose to avoid confrontation and rely solely on the rules of sneaking stealth more or less as described in chapter 6—that is, by means of a relational movement through the in-game environment that allows the player to stay below the software's dynamic thresholds of perceptibility.

Finally, there is the subsystem of magic abilities, which the player can also choose to accept or refuse: all games in the *Dishonored* series allow the player to reject the mark of the Outsider, but this is something that a player would most commonly do on a replay to increase the challenge. The important thing to note for now is that all these gameplay subsystems can be combined in different ways and to varying effects to allow the player to develop their own style of engaging with the game world. For instance, regardless of how they are combined, stealth and magic allow the player to play the game in a "lethal" or "nonlethal" manner, meaning that enemies can be killed, knocked out, or entirely spared. (Combat is usually lethal.) This also applies to all the main mission targets of the game: It is possible to play all *Dishonored*

games without killing or even touching a single enemy. Given the project of this chapter, the following gameplay analysis will focus on the nonlethal combination of stealth and magic, the style of magical stealth.

A last crucial feature of immersive sims is that the player's decisions, including the choice of play style, have lasting consequences in the game world. Due to their commitment to complex simulation and contingency, immersive sims want the player to experience how their actions play out in the long run. As Mark Brown (2016) states, "Immersive sims are consistent. They try to avoid special cases and one-offs, and there are rarely any failure states for anything other than getting killed. You won't find these games telling you to return to the mission area, or making you restart the level because an ally was killed in duty. The simulation just continues." In *Dishonored*, the player can inform the game world through the level of "chaos" they leave behind. The level of chaos is determined along two axes: lethality and stealth.

At the end of each mission, the player's performance is assessed in terms of how many civilians and hostiles were killed and how often the player was detected (see figure 9.1). The chaos level then influences the subsequent development of the game in a number of ways. If the player chooses to kill their enemies, they will encounter more guards on the subsequent missions. Their trail of bodies will also attract the rats that plague the city of Dunwall or the bloodflies that have infested the city of Karnaca. Rats and bloodflies are an added environmental threat that complicate the gameplay. In combination with other key narrative decisions, the chaos level also leads to different narrative endings of the game. Generally, a "high chaos" path leads to the "bad" endings of the game, whereas a "low chaos" path leads to the "good" endings of the game.

All of this means that the player's favored style also involves a series of *ethical* choices that have broader systemic repercussions in the game world. The player may be free to choose their play style, but the game incentivizes a stealthy and peaceful play style through its association of stealth and nonlethality with the "good" endings, its special rewards for being "Merciful (Didn't Kill Anyone)" and "Ghostly (Never Detected)" (see figure 9.1), and by increasing the challenge as a punishment for "bad" behavior. In addition, the sequels in the series assume the merciful, good endings as the "canonical" endings of the preceding game. All of this is to say that, overall and despite the dynamic openness of their immersive simulations, the games in the

Figure 9.1
Screenshot of a mission summary from *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* (Bethesda 2017). The diagram on the right coordinates the players' performances in terms of lethality and stealth. This metric determines whether the player left the game world in "high chaos" or "low chaos" (https://youtu.be/QvSDL4oNk1g?t=1930).

Dishonored series favor a certain play style, a certain gameplay aesthetic for ethical reasons. And indeed, the following analysis is meant to show that *Dishonored*'s immersive simulation fosters the development of magical stealth as an ethico-aesthetic praxis.

If the player follows this praxis, they will occasionally experience how the effects of their actions ripple through the world in unexpected ways. These temporalities are rather queer (Love 2009). At the beginning of the *Dishonored 2* mission "A Crack in the Slab," Billie Lurk/Meagan Foster uses her ship's shallop to drop the playable character—either Corvo or Emily—off at a dock. Billie/Meagan will be waiting there for the player at the end of the mission. (A lot of missions go like that: Billie/Meagan steers Corvo/Emily through the shifty canals of Karnaca. Billie/Meagan is a steersperson.) During this mission, the player can prevent the descent into madness of a character named Aramis Stilton, who is also implied to have more than homosocial attractions, by means of time travel. The player's decision might retroactively change Billie Lurk/Meagan Foster's timeline: When we first meet her as Meagan Foster in *Dishonored 2*, she has lost her right eye and lower right arm, mutilations she has incurred by indeterminate events in the past. If the player

saves Stilton *in the past* by means of a time travel conceit restricted to this mission, the events that produce Meagan's disabilities never occur. Once the player returns from saving Aramis Stilton, Meagan Foster is unharmed: the gameplay thus creates incompossible representations of the same character, granting redress for past suffering through time travel. *Death of the Outsider* deforms the temporalities of Billie Lurk's life once more: the Outsider catches up with the unharmed Billie, suggesting that she had cheated fate and must now fulfill her role in the world of the Empire of the Isles. After Billie refuses his mark, the Outsider takes her eye and arm and "gifts" her with steampunk prostheses endowed with magic. Retrospectively, Billie's physical transformation and reliance on magical prostheses seem to have been inevitable, but they are also affirmed as that which enables her to constructively participate in the world.

Let's finally take a concrete gameplay moment to see how these newly endowed powers allow the game to stage an encounter between two different ways of approaching the world. After her transformation, Billie sets out to end the Outsider. She finds out that to do so, she needs a "twin-bladed knife," a mysterious blade in the possession of the Eyeless Gang of Karnaca, led among others by one city administrator by the name of Ivan Jacobi. So in the subsequent mission, "Follow the Ink," Billie locates Ivan Jacobi in the upper-class district of Upper Cyria. Jacobi is rehearsing a public speech against regraving on Colibron Plaza, jumbling his sentences as he prances to and fro, second-guessing his rhetorical choices and complaining about incompetent guards who don't know how to properly fix the lock of the trapdoor in the Plaza's stage floor. Colibron Plaza is an open game space with its target right at the center, pacing back and forth over a retractable silver platter. But Jacobi is surrounded by guards spread over the plaza's three levels: the main square with the trapdoor in the middle, a cellar level accessible in three different ways (stairs from the plaza, a hole in the wall from the adjoining building, and the trapdoor), and an upper level of balconies that overlook Colibron Plaza. There are huge brutes and virtuoso swordspeople ready to defend their territory at the sight of an enemy. Their intersecting perceptual and defensive abilities layer themselves on top of the simple game space as an "exclusionary matrix"; that is, a tight network of modes of algorithmic action and perception, the goal of which, in this case, is to securitize public space (Butler 2011, xiii). This matrix makes the fictional game space dangerous and uninhabitable for the player character at all times. Billie Lurk cannot

return to the fold, and so must *become* the fold. The alternative—arguably queer—way of approaching the world is that of the nonconforming individual placed in such an environment. Billie Lurk does not respect the exclusionary matrix that attempts to order her every movement. But instead of confronting this matrix head-on, the stealthy individual favors an approach that allows it to move through the matrix undetected by moving with the surroundings and by modulating them. In his article "The Queer Masculinity of Stealth Games," the games journalist Riley MacLeod (2015) confirms this reading of stealth spaces as environmental puzzles:

> In many ways navigating space in a stealth game feels similar to my daily life as a trans man. As someone who spends a lot of time in cis gay male spaces, there's a ritualized literacy I apply when doing something like entering a new bar for the first time. . . . I read a space for entrances and exits both architectural and interpersonal, signposts for steering through what should be but never is an innocuous evening out. . . . There's a certain secret cartography to navigating the world as trans that imbues things with different pitfalls and possibilities, where I'm asked to see the world as a series of puzzles more than a place I get to live.

Stealth gameplay speaks to the experience of queer survival because it similarly resists the normative and foreclosing mechanisms of the tightly knit, exclusionary matrix by continuously mapping and enacting an environment's affordances for continued existence. And with regard to complexity, the exemplary scene at Colibron Plaza pales in comparison to some highly dynamic spaces included in the *Dishonored* series. One mission in *Dishonored 2*, for instance, is set in the "Clockwork Mansion" of a megalomaniac genius inventor. At the pull of various levers, the entire mansion mechanically reorganizes its walls and floors into several different layouts—for when, say, an inventor needs their library a bit closer to their lab, or when a stealth gamer needs to create new pathways for sneaking closer to their target, a certain inventor (McKeand 2022, 97–98). The abovementioned mission "Crack in the Slab" is another example, by virtue of its time travel conceit: the player first enters Aramis Stilton's dilapidated mansion and must then use a device to instantly toggle back and forth between the present and that fateful day that triggered Stilton's descent into madness and Billie/Meagan's loss of limb and eye. This toggle between two moments in time is in fact an alternation between two versions of the same game space: the present-day version of the building is abandoned and contains very few enemies, but parts of it are so ruined that they are inaccessible. These obstructed sections are wide open in

the past, when the mansion stood in all its glory, but in turn the house is full of people, including many guards. The challenge thus consists in finding a way through the building by strategically switching between past and present. If this is done properly, Aramis Stilton keeps his sanity and Billie/Meagan her eye and arm. In their commentary on the design of this level, the developers have suggested that this time travel conceit, which allows for the correction of a past mistake, is a playful *mise-en-abime* of the common practice of saving-and-reloading one's game state when one has "messed up" one's playthrough due to a mistake ("Inside the Making of *Dishonored 2*'s Best Level").

This is mentioned also to clarify that a reading of *Dishonored*'s narrative and gameplay as a commentary-by-analogy *on* stealth gameplay and related practices of digital culture is appropriate and sometimes even intended by the makers. The important point here is that the careful navigation of such complex and dynamic environment requires a "literacy" or skillfulness at entering and modulating fields of relation. This is a skill because, as McLeod suggests, habitual perception is processually attuned to creative world-making for queer survival. In stealth, perception is immediately political.

To move through the exclusionary matrix of Colibron Plaza, Billie has a variety of powers, of which two prove particularly productive in this situation: Displace and Semblance. Displace allows Billie to instantly "teleport" across short distances. This magical power of instantaneous displacement has been a key ability in all *Dishonored* games, even though it has different names and animations depending on the character one plays: When playing as Corvo Atano, the ability is called "Blink." For Emily Kaldwin, the ability is called "Far Reach." In part thanks to *Dishonored*, it has become a staple of supernatural stealth games. The *Aragami* series (Lince Works, 2016 and 2021) and Arkane's own immersive sim *Deathloop* (2021) are more recent examples. With the help of this ability, the player can avoid enemy sightlines by displacing to otherwise inaccessible corners and passageways. Thus, in "Follow the Ink," Billie can obtain the key—required to access the twin-bladed knife and dangling from Jacobi's belt—by carefully analyzing the game space for the guards' placement, movement, and perception and then displacing into the dead angles of the surveillance system, the negative space of the exclusionary matrix. From the entrance to the plaza, Billie can displace onto the vents to the top left and from there to a nearby balcony to overlook the space. A player may sit here for a while, listen to Jacobi's amusing ramblings, and read the game space for its dynamic affordances and obstacles. One may

discover an adjoining building that is relatively free of guards and has a basement with a hole in the wall. And through that hole lies the cellar underneath the trapdoor. If the trapdoor is activated at the right moment, Jacobi falls through the door and is knocked unconscious. Billie can simply pick up the key and sneak back through the hole in the wall. No one ever saw her. That bloody trapdoor! *Or*, if the player wants to entirely avoid taking out Ivan Jacobi, they may use the Semblance ability. Semblance allows Billie to temporarily take on the appearance of any other subdued NPC in the game. Fortunately, there's one guard slacking off just outside Colibron Plaza. Billie can subdue him (nonlethally, *bien sûr*) and take on his appearance. This temporary magical disguise allows Billie to walk straight across the plaza and into the curtained-off area behind Jacobi's stage. Now Billie is on one side of the curtain and Jacobi is right on the other, pacing back and forth and oh-so-close to the curtain. Like most dramatic curtains, this one has a tiny opening through which one can spy the key. And the next time Jacobi brushes against the curtain, Billie can pick it right off him. Billie can then use the same magical powers to sneak out of Colibron Plaza.

As presented here, the solutions may seem quite straightforward. But a first-time player does not know any of the details presented here. Working out such elegantly stealthy solutions requires careful study of the game environment. At the beginning of the mission, the player only knows that the twin-bladed knife is tied to the Eyeless Gang, which hangs out in Upper Cyria. The very identity and location of the people who will lead Billie to the blade must be sussed out from the surroundings. The world of *Dishonored* is littered with documents, files, notes, newspapers, and books that function as traces of the locals' lives and social mores. A newspaper may frame the local circumstances in terms of broader social and political developments. An "absent" note stuck to a door may point in the direction of the absentee's current location. A diary may contain the combination for a locked safe. The player's task is to find these disparate pieces of information and, by connecting them, to understand the game world's social and interpersonal relations.

Indeed, the environmental storytelling of *Dishonored* is another subsystem of the game, which, if properly read, can lead the player through a series of interconnected and more localized challenges in magical stealth like the one on Colibron Plaza. Yet, while the player needs to understand the game space as an exclusionary matrix, they are not encouraged to reproduce this violent approach. Instead, magical stealth is available as a peaceful alternative to

force-on-force combat, as it allows player to continuously "sidestep" threats of violence (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 8). It is in this sense that *Dishonored*'s magical stealth operates as one of those radically "different grammars of play" that, following Edmond Chang, characterize what he calls "queergaming" because they resist the "normative ideologies" of gameplay (2017, 19).

Dishonored's magical stealth conceives of the world as a malleable network of events, a manifold mesh of prehensions. Surely, there are attempts to stratify these dynamisms, to normalize the functioning of the subsystems and prevent certain deviations or illicit connections within the network. But magical stealth is what allows these queer connections to be made nonetheless. Following Gilbert Simondon's astounding genealogy of technicity, one could say that *Dishonored* performs a magical mode of parsing the world as a "network of privileged points of exchange between the being and the milieu" (2017, 177), a mode that tries to go beyond the Western "splitting in two of being" into subjects and objects (173). In Simondon's account, this understanding of the world as split—in mutually exclusive ways—into objects and subjects also leads to the dephasing of human existence into "technicity" and "religion," understood as two "phases" or processual domains charged with solving existential problems concerning (technical) objects or (spiritual) subjects, respectively (176–177). To compensate for and integrate the tensions that arise from the separation of technicity from spirituality or mind, Western civilization develops the compensatory systems of "aesthetic thought" and later "science" and "ethics" (174). But before the initial split, there was "magical unity," in which the human being is "linked to a universe experienced as a milieu" (177):

> The magical universe is already structured, but according to a mode prior to the segregation of object and subject; this primitive mode of structuration is one that distinguishes figure and ground by marking key-points in the universe. . . . In fact, preceding the segregation of units, a *reticulation of space and time* that highlights privileged places and moments institutes itself, as if all [human] power to act and all the world's ability to influence [humans] were concentrated in these places and in these moments. These places and these moments keep hold of, concentrate, and *express the forces contained* in the ground [*fond*] of reality that supports them. These points and these moments are not separate realities; they draw their force from the ground they dominate; but they localize and focalize the attitude of the living vis-à-vis its milieu. (Simondon 2017, 178; emphasis added)

Magic as a mode of thought acknowledges the complex and interdependent relationality of the world. And it knows that this reticular world is the most

sensitive to further developments and complications at certain systemic key-moments and "high-places" (178): "These key-points are real and objective, but they are that by which *the human being is immediately bound to the world*, both in order to be influenced by it and in order to act upon it; they are points of contact and of mutual, mixed reality, places of exchange and of communication because they are formed from a knot between the two realities" (Simondon 2017, 178; emphasis added).

Magic is the creation and activation of these systemic nodes to world-making effect. In this way, magical stealth sidesteps stratified divisions and creatively reintegrates worldly tensions in a more peaceful manner. By allowing that which was carefully suppressed by the systemic order to emerge against all odds, magical stealth transduces the world toward peace. Through magic, *Dishonored* articulates "a conception of the world in which certain things that official common sense deems irrational—voodoo, magic, communicating with spirits, seeing nonchronological time—operate to make the world appear reasonable and amenable to . . . survival" (Keeling 2007, 153). Incidentally, magic's immediate bond to the world also clarifies why magic requires an ethics of immanence that values worldly relations and creates unity through complexity. Indeed, the immanent goal of *Dishonored*'s magical stealth is to turn the game world's exclusionary matrix into an "open mesh of possibilities" (Sedgwick 1994, 8). In this sense, *Dishonored*'s magical stealth is a *sidestepping* not only in a previously evoked kinesthetic sense of occupying the negative space of the exclusionary matrix, but also in a philosophical sense: "*Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object" (Sedgwick 2003, 8; emphasis in original). Indeed, *Dishonored*'s magical stealth undoes linear cause and effect through its nonchronological or queer temporalities. It dissolves subjects and objects into a complex event fabric. And Billie's undoing of the Outsider is also a rejection of the law of the excluded middle, or logic of mutual exclusion, as it is called here. Finally, magical stealth is a call for a different cultural approach to the digital and its magical totem, code.

Undoing the Stratification of Code

Before science and religion developed as two separate systems that integrate the new tensions between subjects and objects, there was, in Simondon's

genealogy of technicity, *aesthetic thought*. One could also call it *art*, in the expanded sense of a culturally conditioned, perceptual event that produces sense. Unlike technicity and science, aesthetic thought "is never characteristic of a limited field . . . but only of a tendency," the "tendency to seek a complement with respect to a totality" or cosmic unity (2017, 191, 192). In other words, art is an attempt to reunify what has been split or, more precisely, an "attempt to find an [aesthetic] *analog* of unity" (189; emphasis added). Art can do this because it can create analogs of *this* world that are not governed by the same physical, organic, and cultural stratifications of this world. It can thus reconnect and relate what a worldview based on a subject-object split no longer permits. "Aesthetic thought is what maintains the implicit memory of unity" because it "re-establishes a reticular universe at least for perception" (191, 192).

This gameplay analysis has shown how *Dishonored* creates such a reticular universe in both narrative and gameplay. It has also been suggested that this reticular worldview can be read as an analogy for digital culture more generally. Remains the question: What's the point of the analogy?

Art is not only a "permanent reminder of the rupture of unity of the magical mode of being"; it is also "a reminder of the *search for its future unity*" (Simondon 2017, 174; emphasis added). In this process philosophy, art has a future-oriented world-making function because it actively creates alternative visions of how else the world could proceed. They may only be analogs of reality, but they nonetheless have the power to "polarize[] the world" by creating, for perception, a tension between what was or is and what could be (206). Art is both an acknowledgment of these tensions—and their unsatisfying integrations—as well as a call or "appeal" to reintegrate them in a more holistic manner (202; see also footnote 5). This cannot be achieved through a literal return to the magical mode of thought. Art can however intercede in this split world of ours, repolarize it, and—by virtue of these new polarities—"transduce" it toward a more balanced or metastable reorganization of its various subsystems (209). In this process, works of art themselves become the "outstanding" or key points at which one can begin to engender new realities: "The aesthetic work thus makes the universe bud, extending it by establishing a network of works, in other words by establishing radiating realities of exception, key-points of a universe that is at once human and natural" (196).

If art can be said to carry traces of magic, it is in this particular sense. It worlds by creating analogs of the world that wait for realization (Simondon

2017, 203). The "aesthetic reticulation of the world is a network of analogies" (200). If the *Dishonored* series can be considered such a key point in the network of digital art, it is because it offers the experience of a radiating reality of exception. And if, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun suggests, code is often discursively treated as sourcery or magic, the digital magic of *Dishonored* can in turn be read as an analog for code. *Dishonored* and its magical stealth constitute an aesthetic project that both problematizes some core tendencies of digital culture and proposes an alternative pragmatic outlook.

Like code, *Dishonored*'s magic operates as powerful and increasingly arcane mode of informing the world. And it is through their respective enclosures, whether fictional or not, that both code and magic end up reinforcing existing stratifications of power. But in Billie Lurk's radiating reality of exception, the exclusionary enclosure of magic can be undone. In the narrative, to liberate magic, one must call it by its name. As previously mentioned, the Outsider was instantiated in a ritual that erased the memory of his name. At the very end of the series, Billie Lurk finds out that she can peacefully release the Outsider from his position as *pharmakos* by whispering his long-forgotten name into his ear. The peaceful player chooses to give the code word that lifts the authoritative prohibition of magic and undoes the Abbey of the Everyman, the "priesthood" that enforces both the Outsider's exclusion and the prohibition of magic. The undoing of inclusive exclusion requires first of all that we acknowledge, by naming, the sites at which it violently constitutes itself and to restore them to dignity (or, in *Dishonored*'s steampunk vocabulary: *honor*). This narrative solution is achieved through the gameplay of magical stealth, which can be insightfully contrasted with the surveillance stealth of *Assassin's Creed* (see chapters 7 and 8). In terms of interface and gameplay aesthetics, the *Dishonored* series never reduces stealth to a series of surveil-and-kill jobs as *Assassin's Creed* tends to do. Far from the horizontal and vertical mappings of surveillance stealth that preemptively fix the world according to established categories, the magical stealth of *Dishonored* allows for a complex relational engagement with digital procedures that fosters creative expression. "Could it be that rather than resort to maps, we need to immerse ourselves in networked flows—time-based movements that both underlie and frustrate maps," Chun asks (2011, 75). Yes, Billie Lurk replies.

That is, *Dishonored* is a game software—a digital aesthetic analog of worldly processes—that resists software's more common tendency to capture and visualize. Diverging from digital technology's logic of command, *Dishonored*'s

digital prehensions are not instrumentalized as a tool for representing and stabilizing a dynamic status quo, but as an operationally open process that, if allowed, is able to transduce the world toward novel constellations. A player who experiments with the immersive sim's subsystems can create complex and emergent solutions to the challenges posed. In this way, the affordances of *Dishonored*'s magical stealth not only invite and encourage contingency to enter and inform the operational system of digital procedures. What is more, the immersive sim emphasizes that the software itself is but a *relatively* regularized functional ensemble whose prehensions are in turn contingent upon the variegated ways in which its subsystems touch upon each other. Thus, instead of constructing the world as a target to be eliminated, *Dishonored* conjures an aesthetic analog of the reticular reunification of the human and the world, capacitated in part by the digital. Here, the magic of the digital does not produce a sense of mastery over the world but rather enables an enlivening gathering of worldly relations. But it is also clear that magical stealth is never neutral, that acts of magic have ethical implications.

In *Dishonored*, ethical evaluation does not happen after the technical process has run its course. It is immanent to the operative relations between software and user and leaves open the possibility of peace. Any players—and particularly those with queer sensibilities—may tactically proceed through a complex, hostile space without suffering or causing harm. It is in this sense that the *Dishonored* series is also an analogy for the reunification of technics and ethics, a plea for an integration of software into a holistic, ecological worldview. Software not as the control function of a "smart planet," but as one mode of existence and of thought among many, but one pleat of process to fold itself into the cosmic manifold of prehensions.

10 Social Stealth: Camp Aesthetic, Whiteness, and Artificial Stupidity in *Hitman*

What does a disguise do? Following the dictum "Clothes make the man," the Swiss literary scholar Peter von Matt explores the anthropological dimension of disguises and suggests that a function of the disguise is to temporarily unmake and remake not only our social location but the very idea of a social location determined by one's appearance: "If all clothing [*Kleidung*] gives access to me as a person, if I—who am inevitably a social being—am determined by my clothing, then each disguise [*Ver-Kleidung*] becomes an act of freedom against that fundamental injunction. Under my disguise, I am neither naked nor clothed; I am like Adam" (von Matt 2013, 83). Von Matt points out that donning a disguise is not simply a matter of substituting one socially localized identity for another. Processually speaking, disguises produce a qualitative change in our perception of reality. He explains this qualitative change as a return to the biblical paradise, a time before any distinctions—such as that between "clothed" and "naked"—existed in the first place. While this chapter is not interested in conceptually following von Matt to paradise (and its straight gender model), it is interested in the idea of an existence prior to distinctions or categories because it helps explain how stealth gameplay lets players intervene in a game environment in ways that can be described as queering. In the present account, the preferred concept to articulate this phase of existence is what Brian Massumi calls *bare activity*. Bare activity is the incipient phase of reality-as-experienced in which all activities, tendencies, and potentials commingle and struggle to make ingress into reality. "*Bare activity*: the just-beginning-to-stir of the event coming into its newness out of the soon to be prior background activity it will have left creatively behind" (Massumi 2011, 2–3; emphasis in original). In other words, bare activity describes the phase during which presubjectivities

and preobjectivities are forming and informing one another to relationally actualize as provisional, temporarily localizable, and distinguishable subjects and objects. As von Matt suggests, disguises allow individuals to undo such temporarily fixed subject positions and engage in the active and ongoing production of subjectivities.

This chapter looks at a last mode of the aesthetics of stealth: *social stealth*. And it suggests that social stealth allows players to harness the simulated richness of bare activity to inflect what will be experienced as reality in the game world. In social stealth, the player is tasked to hide in plain sight, mainly by taking on certain social roles in the form of disguises and sometimes by blending into crowds. At its core, then, the gameplay mechanics of social stealth are about practices of dissimulation and passing through disguises. The seminal example of social stealth is the *Hitman* series, with its central "disguise" mechanic (IO Interactive, 2000–2021). Around this "disguise" mechanic, this chapter builds an argument in four steps: The following section presents the *Hitman* series, its notorious disguise mechanic and shows that this mechanic queers the game aesthetic. Specifically, the argument foregrounds the camp qualities of *Hitman*'s "World of Assassination" trilogy. The chapter then proceeds to a detailed analysis of the stealth gameplay to show how social stealth—a queer art of passing—allows the player to ontopowerfully reshape the simulated game world in productive ways. The third section pursues this further by addressing the pronounced whiteness of *Hitman*'s avatar, Agent 47. The argument will suggest that *Hitman*'s camp aesthetic invites the player to read Agent 47's whiteness against the grain. Agent 47—a hypervisible "stealth-universal-white-man" (Muñoz 2009, 94)—and his implausible acts of passing imply a critique of software's whiteness more generally. In that sense, *Hitman*'s campy social stealth is indeed "the lie that tells the truth" (Core 1984). It will be seen, however, that the perceptual threshold for such a reading-against-the-grain is itself ontopowerfully produced: whiteness, even if hypervisible, is easily unseen if it helps maintain the illusion of digital realism. Therefore, the last section insists on the tactical duplicity of stealth, which requires a continuous ethical evaluation of player perception and action. It will provide a final evaluation of stealth as an ethical and political practice of digital culture.

Hitman: A World of Camp

> We're all born naked and the rest is drag.
> —RuPaul Charles

Since its first release in 2000, the *Hitman* franchise has seen eight major releases. After the "original series" (2000–2012), the developing studio, IO Interactive, rebooted the series in 2016 to launch the "World of Assassination" trilogy. This latter trilogy will be the focus of this chapter. Important differences between the franchise's two series will be addressed in due time. First, consider the element that all these games have in common: the by-now-iconic avatar named Agent 47. In each game, the player moves this nondescript, mannequinesque virtuoso assassin through mazelike set pieces to expertly assassinate his high-stakes targets in the most ingenious ways. Playing a *Hitman* game often feels like an old-school spy fantasy. Agent 47 did not choose this vocation. He is the result of a cloning experiment the goal of which was to create a series of impassible assassins, all clones of one another and distinguished only by the iconic barcodes on the back of their heads. These genetic experiments, conducted by the cruel German scientist Dr. Otto Ort-Meyer, combined the genomes of no less than five men. Yes, Agent 47 has five fathers, which will be important later, when the argument turns to the avatar's whiteness. Born on September 5, 1964, Agent 47 was raised in a Romanian asylum and trained in combat and weaponry. Experimental serums were used to suppress the adolescent 47's memories and feelings. *Hitman 2*, the second installment in the "World of Assassination" trilogy (2018), spends a lot of its narrative on letting Agent 47 revisit his dark past, find a childhood friend from the asylum, and take down some of the people responsible for his life as an instrument of violence. In hindsight, this story arc turns out to be the narrative throughline of the trilogy, obscured by a ludicrous convolution of nested conspiracies and numerous double-crosses in all directions. Playing *Hitman* often feels like an extremely self-aware soap opera. In terms of gameplay, this backstory allows for an avatar that functions as a resourceful cipher with no personal memories or attachments, a mannequin to be dressed in myriad disguises.

Disguises are a key gameplay mechanic of *Hitman*'s social stealth. Social stealth gameplay is based on the idea that the avatar can be made to hide in plain sight if their appearance matches their social environment. For

example, Agent 47 might look like he belongs in the restricted employee area of a big hotel if he wears a hotel uniform. As a gameplay mechanic in *Hitman*, disguises are affordances for social imperceptibility. But disguises are not the only way to articulate social stealth. Remember *Watch Dogs: Legion* (WDL), discussed in chapter 4. The gameplay there integrated a light form of social stealth by making the player recruit their "legion," or team of playable associates. Each of these associates has certain abilities and skill perks motivated by some aspect of their social position, usually their profession. This same aspect may also allow them to disappear into a particular social background. To activate specific abilities and perks, the player has to choose a team member with those skills as their active avatar. WDL thus affixes social imperceptibility and other skills to particular individuals and makes the player switch between them. This implementation of social stealth supports WDL's fantasy of growing an underground resistance collective. By contrast, the disguise mechanic in *Hitman* assumes that one virtuoso assassin can convincingly assume a panoply of disguises in any social context without ever changing his gait, body language, or voice. The premise is a ridiculous hoot, and the "World of Assassination" trilogy knows it.

If the original series is much less self-aware and campy, this is also due to the technological developments in gaming software. The games critic Steven Nguyen Scaife suggests that the simplistic disguise mechanic did not stand out in the early 2000s because it was on par with the simpler level design, gameplay mechanics, and overall graphics of the time (2018). In other words, players could more easily suspend their disbelief and concede the disguise mechanic and Agent 47's many split-second "quick changes" as artifacts of technical limitations because the standards in game design were generally much lower. Just a decade later, the situation is quite different. By the mid-2010s, standards in photorealistic graphics and level design have increased so much that the disguise mechanic and its animation stand out as an unrealistic vestige of archaic game design. But the mechanic is so central to the series that the developers had no choice but to retain it in the "World of Assassination" trilogy. The developers thus faced an aesthetic problem: How can the sprawling, complex, photorealistic levels of current design standards be combined with a simplistic, yet crucial gameplay mechanic? The developers' solution to this problem consists in filling the realistic social spaces with highly theatrical protagonists (meaning targets) and over-the-top storylines. The aesthetic hyperbole of it all allows the series to acknowledge its own

contrivedness in a self-ironic manner. The "World of Assassination" revels in its exaggerated, self-referential use of all-too-familiar spy film conventions—and all that, at least in part, to hide an outdated game mechanic in plain sight. So, to follow Nguyen Scaife, it is "47's penchant for disguises" that required "*Hitman*'s humour to evolve" (2018). Put differently, to accommodate Agent 47's implausible drag, *Hitman* invests in camp.

Considering the long-standing connection between spies and queers briefly touched upon in chapter 9 (see also Garber 1997, 234–266), it isn't surprising that the "hitman in a camp world" conceit works rather charmingly. Like *Hitman*, camp cultivates an aesthetic interest in surface appearance and builds around it a view of the world and "life as theatre" (Babuscio 1999, 123). Like camp, *Hitman* "by focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles . . . are superficial—a matter of style" (123). And like queers, Agent 47 constantly finds himself in socially restrictive situations that require him to "pass" in a normative social role not his own. Following Jack Babuscio's seminal writing on camp, the queer experience of passing "can, and often does, lead to a heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise [and] impersonation" (1999, 124). Thus, in passing, both Agent 47 and camp find "a method whereby one can multiply personalities, play various parts, [and] assume a variety of roles" (121). In the first instance, then, camp helps the *Hitman* series integrate the disguise mechanic into a consistent overall aesthetic vision. But the queer sensibility of camp also provides the rebooted *Hitman* series with its view of society. In the "World of Assassination" trilogy, every social act is but a performance carefully embedded in a network of performances collectively maintained by a population of involuntary and perhaps unwitting players. In such a view, social success depends on realizing that one takes on socially patterned behaviors and shedding them selectively to take on new ones. One queer insight to draw from this is, of course, that one's desire or ability to perform certain social roles do not guarantee access to those roles, as especially the drag balls of Black and Latino queer communities critically emphasize. The next section will return to this problem. Here, it is important to note that this worldview's fundamental "emphasis on sensuous surfaces" allows *Hitman* to cast the function of conspiracy differently than, for instance, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (Babuscio 1999, 121; also see chapters 7 and 8). Behind every conspiracy in *Hitman*, there is another conspiracy. Providence, Ether, the Ark Society, Haven, IAGO—the list of secret rich clubs could continue. In *Hitman*'s fictional world, there are

so many front organizations for other front organizations and performances to cover up performances that all social reality is swept up in a vortex of aesthetic artifice. And since all social reality is assumed to be fundamentally performed, the global élite's conspiratorial efforts appear as little more than feeble attempts to deny an open secret. *Hitman*'s snarky treatment of conspiracy bespeaks not so much an utter disbelief in official or conspiratorial accounts of reality but a queer awareness that even the most anodyne social reality is carefully aestheticized. If *Hitman* mocks conspiracy thinking, it is mainly to dismiss the implied and naive belief in a "authentic" or "true" reality behind the facade. To put it in the words of RuPaul Charles, the disguises in *Hitman*'s camp world emphasize that "we're all born naked and the rest is drag." Existence is constitutively aesthetic. To be is to be prehended. The gameplay of *Hitman* gives an experience of what it might mean to intervene in a social reality understood as a manifold of prehensions.

Disguises and Social Stealth Gameplay

Like *Dishonored* (discussed in chapter 9), the games in the "World of Assassination" trilogy are constructed as multiple series of separate missions. Each mission takes Agent 47 to a different "destination" or mission level, designed as a dense and complex setting with a distinct sense of locale and a simulated social fabric. Throughout the trilogy, Agent 47 finds himself eliminating a fashion mogul at his own Paris fashion show, sabotaging a target's heart operation at a private hospital/luxury resort in Japan, taking care of a militia leader in the Colorado prairies, and killing a tech CEO and his car-racing daughter during a high-profile race in Miami. As these brief examples indicate, Agent 47 often arrives at these destinations during special events that are themselves carefully controlled public-facing performances like a fashion show or a car race. Such performed events must run like clockwork. It is not so implausible, then, that *Hitman*'s destinations are inhabited by a panoply of nonplayable characters (NPCs) who are mostly on timed activity loops. At a racing event, for instance, spectators go through the motions of spectating and servers serve drinks on a loop. Security guards make their rounds around the premises, food vendors are vending food on repeat, and technicians tinker incessantly with cars. In the run-up to the funeral of Elizabeth II of Britain in 2022, a campy internet meme presented the ceremonial schedule for the queen's funeral procession as a *Hitman* mission briefing, complete

with visuals and the handler's voice-over instructions. It was a send-up of the excessively procedural and aestheticized media coverage of the funeral, but it was also a good way to articulate one type of mission setting in *Hitman*: over-the-top public-facing high-stakes events with a series of critical moments. By virtue mostly of their professional occupations, almost all of the NPCs have special access to certain restricted areas: only a car mechanic wearing the right team uniform can enter that racing team's garage. Overall, then, *Hitman*'s destinations are designed as *places* in the strong sense of the word, meaning that they are simulated microcosms composed of complex, interlocking social domains with various functions and meanings. Each of these component domains will allow or preclude Agent 47's access based on his social role, determined by his disguise. In terms of gameplay, this provides a vast, interconnected, and responsive game space that allows the player to create dozens of ways to accomplish Agent 47's missions.

For the purpose of demonstration, consider the Italian seaside resort Sapienza, with its lively piazza and rustic back-alley shops. Admire its picturesque church, just a hop-skip from the beach and marina. If you go too far past the jetty, you might discover the local grotto. But unfortunately it's off limits, now that Dr. Silvio Caruso has established his underground toxin laboratory and a seaplane landing site in there. Caruso has also privatized the ruins of the town's historical fortress. One would have to trespass to get access to the ruins if one wanted to admire, let alone use, the functional antique cannon that is housed there. Sun-kissed, Technicolor Sapienza is a paragon of camp aestheticism and hilariously over-the-top espionage clichés, even without a special event to attend (see "HITMAN—Welcome to Sapienza"). Agent 47 is here to eliminate Silvio Caruso and Francesca De Santis, two bioengineers who are developing a DNA-specific lethal virus into a viable biological weapon, and to destroy the virus. (Most destinations in the "World of Assassination" trilogy come with more than one mission target, which complicates the gameplay.)

At the beginning of the first playthrough, Agent 47 sits on the piazza and reads the newspaper to "blend in." (Blending in through certain disguise-related activities increases Agent 47's social stealth, as another example will shortly clarify.) How can he get from here to the targets in Caruso's protected mansion? The player can begin by exploring the area of the café right by the piazza. With the Italian suit, the player can only access the customer area of the café. They cannot go behind the counter or into the back rooms of the

café, where they might find useful items such as rat poison for (nonlethally) incapacitating an individual. Using and combining such interactive objects are crucial elements of the gameplay, especially if one strives to be a creative assassin. For example, if one can find some gunpowder and a cannon ball, get them to that antique cannon in the ruins and fire it at the right moment, then one might just be able to down an escaping seaplane.

In this, *Hitman* somewhat resembles the genre of the immersive sim discussed in chapter 9. However, *Hitman*'s gameplay mechanics do not rely on a series of subsystems that interlink in complex ways as they do in *Dishonored*. Rather, the combination of various objects to produce unexpected results is more akin to the logical puzzle-solving in a point-and-click adventure, except that the game creates so many affordances for how objects can interact that there are many different solutions instead of only one. Anyway, the cannon kill is an affordance that a player would likely discover only after many playthroughs.

Back to the café: Exploring the surrounding area, the player can spot an employee of the café having a cigarette break in the quiet back alley. Here, the player can subdue the employee, a "kitchen assistant," disguise himself as such by donning the employee's outfit, pick up his key to the café, and ideally hide the employee's unconscious body to avoid unwelcome attention. In this disguise, Agent 47 is now relatively imperceptible as an intruder in the café. "Relatively," because in *Hitman,* there is almost always one NPC in every social domain who sees through Agent 47's disguise, indicated by a white dot above the NPC. The café manager is likely to know his personnel, including the kitchen assistant, and will probably perceive that Agent 47 is trespassing. In this way, the gameplay imposes limits on the efficiency of Agent 47's disguises and thus ensures that the player can never feel too safe in any disguise. Social stealth is always precarious, in the sense that detection is always imminent. One way, however, in which Agent 47 can disguise himself from these more perceptive NPCs is to "blend in." A kitchen assistant, say, can blend in by chopping vegetables. But blending in also immobilizes the avatar and serves mainly as a last resort or a "breather" moment in what can be tense and complex gameplay experiences.

The gameplay further underscores the precarity of social stealth through the "trespassing" indicator, a yellow marker right above the minimap at the bottom-left corner of the screen. Agent 47 is trespassing whenever he is in an area for which he does not wear the appropriate disguise. In and of itself,

trespassing is not a problem, so long as no one observes Agent 47 while he's doing it. For instance, after subduing the kitchen assistant in the back alley and taking his key, Agent 47 can open the basement door to the café and walk right in. But without the kitchen assistant's disguise, he would be trespassing. In this case, that is fine because most of the time there's no one in the café's basement. Yet the "Trespassing" indicator signals that Agent 47 is not (yet) wearing the appropriate disguise for his current location and he would be confronted if he were detected by another NPC familiar with the café. And that would be the end of a playthrough aiming for "no detections," which rewards a higher mission score. (Thus, higher mission scores act as a way to incentivize stealthy gameplay even when it is not strictly necessary.) The "Trespassing" indicator lets the player know that they are at an increased risk of being detected; Agent 47 is just below the threshold of perceptibility, and this is where he needs to remain for the purpose of stealthily informing the world around him. The smallest mistake could expose the entire infiltration mission. Success is always a narrow escape.[1]

From this brief example, one can extrapolate and evaluate the overall gameplay experience that each mission of *Hitman* proposes. If *Hitman* imagines the world as a complex fabric of interlocking and unevenly accessible procedures, then this complex as a whole can be subversively informed through a series of minor local interventions, which themselves combine tactical aesthetic imitation and procedural deviation. Tactical aesthetic imitation is articulated through disguises. In Sapienza alone, Agent 47 can wear up to twenty-six disguises, most of which give the avatar a generic professional role such as store clerk, delivery man, church staff, mansion staff, gardener, bodyguard, or kitchen assistant. By subduing NPCs and donning their clothes as a disguise, Agent 47 repeats the NPC's aesthetic surface, but only to repurpose the function of the NPC procedure toward the goal of assassination. By tactically repeating aesthetic surfaces and deviating procedures, the player can—little by little, step by step—make Agent 47 walk right up to his target and inform the procedural complex in a more decisive manner.

Thinking of *Hitman* as a game software, then, the gameplay suggests that stealthy subversion can be achieved by analyzing the repetitive and normative algorithmic procedures of the simulation and *repeating* them to introduce a functional and potentially lasting divergence in the simulation's mobile architecture. And an analogous argument can be made for the simulated fiction of the campy chameleon spy fantasy. In this fantasy, one is able to

continuously assess the accessibility of various domains and find affordances for assimilating to these domains for the double purpose of survival and continued subversion. This makes Agent 47 an expert in the queer art of passing, understood as a "passing into normative social structures" for the double purpose of "both conformity and challenge to those structures" (Fuchs 1997, 226). In her analysis of *Pillow Talk* (directed by Michael Gordon, 1959)—a film that is very different in genre, yet resonant in its camp preoccupation with dissimulation and false identities—Cynthia J. Fuchs writes: "In passing as a given identity, . . . you must assert a stable, already categorical identity in order to be visible, to be representable; while passing would seem to defy categories, it must adhere to categories as a concept, as well as a means of social and political organization" (227). This applies to the social stealth in *Hitman*: Recognizable identities are swept up in a process of dissimulation. In each disguise, Agent 47 temporarily assimilates to an exclusionary social group to pursue his devious purpose. Both procedurally and representationally, then, social stealth embraces tactical, temporary, and selective conformity to a complex system for the strategic goal of challenging or subverting that system. This is not to univocally embrace the divisive practice of passing but, first and foremost, to pragmatically acknowledge the imperceptibility that it warrants as a strategy for queer survival and digital stealth, even as it disturbingly—and suspensefully, in the case of fiction—brings personal safety and existential threat into precarious association.

The fantasy of virtuoso passing, then, is one way in which social stealth allows the player to queerly "make the world your weapon," as the tagline of *Hitman 2* suggests. This notion of weaponizing the world becomes even clearer in what the "World of Assassination" trilogy calls "opportunities" and "mission stories." Both opportunities and mission stories are series of in-game events that relate to one of the mission targets, usually a person that Agent 47 is tasked to eliminate. These series of events are often triggered through conversations between NPCs that Agent 47 happens to overhear. Playing *Hitman*, one quickly learns that NPCs have a tendency of divulging mission-relevant information to each other just when Agent 47 walks by.

Since Dr. Silvio Caruso is still alive, let's go back to the café on the piazza. If the player decides to explore the area around the café in Sapienza, where Agent 47 is tasked with killing the bioengineer Caruso, they might overhear a phone conversation of Dr. Oscar Lafayette's: "Dr. Lafayette speaking . . . Just so. I am outside Villa Caruso now, enjoying a coffee in the sun. Lovely town.

So anything I should know about Dr. Caruso before our first session? I was briefed on his anxiety attacks, his gynophobia . . . Hm, very well. Don't you worry. Caruso is not the first troubled genius I have turned around. . . . I'll have young Silvio calm and serene in no time . . . And you as well" ("Hitman 2016 Catharsis Run"). If the player chooses to take this opportunity, Agent 47's handler, Diana Burnwood, will provide a short briefing: This is the first meeting of Lafayette and Caruso, meaning that Caruso and his house staff are unlikely to know what Lafayette looks like. Agent 47 can thus take on Lafayette's identity by putting on his outfit, which allows him to encounter Caruso in the very private setting of a therapy session. To disguise Agent 47 as Dr. Lafayette, the player can choose to pour the rat poison they found earlier into the coffee that Lafayette is enjoying in the sun. Having drunk the poisoned coffee, Lafayette will urgently need a bathroom and thus deviate from his standard NPC procedure. Once in the private space of the bathroom, Agent 47 can inconspicuously subdue the therapist and don his clothes. Now Agent 47 can walk into Villa Caruso, where he will be escorted to Caruso's private rooms. Once Caruso himself arrives, he'll lie on the couch to discuss his mental health problems: his controlling mother, Isabella, destroyed his relationship with his high-school sweetheart, whom Isabella deemed unworthy. Silvio confesses that, after many years of a rather functional love-hate mother-son relationship, he ended up smothering Isabella. The only—mental—problem is that he is now regularly visited by his mother's ghost. Whenever the player has heard enough, they can smother Caruso in return to complete the opportunity "Catharsis."

This is an example of the kind of opportunity or mission story that gives Agent 47 privileged access to the target. Other mission stories set off a chain of events that leave the target dead without Agent 47's direct intervention; these "accident kills" staged by Agent 47 are another stock feature of the series. What all these series of events have in common is that they create a complex series of relations through the game world's simulated social space, a movement vector that leads from the immediate surroundings of Agent 47—an overheard conversation—to the mission target—Silvio Caruso in this case.

Each destination in the "World of Assassination" trilogy contains several mission stories, which are often more complex than the brief example given here. But complexity is also created through variety: In *Hitman 2*, four out of the six main destinations have as many as seven mission stories. All these missions have between two and three targets, and the story missions

are distributed more or less equally across the targets, with some missions involving more than one target. A number of mission stories in each level are mutually exclusive because the same target can obviously not be killed twice in the same playthrough. Through these mutually exclusive story missions, the game creates so-called replay value. From an aesthetic perspective, this has two important functions. First, repeated playthroughs further familiarize the player with the destination and thus help develop a strong sense of locale and the impression of a thick social network, a social tissue in which people's interests and occupations intersect in complex ways. Second, repeated practice increases the player's skill level. This is how the game makes the player feel like a virtuoso assassin.

More generally, then, it can be observed that the efficacy of social stealth resides in its potential to manipulate and transform the appearance of a social environment—including its normative, exclusionary boundaries—to create affordances for free movement. For Riley MacLeod (2015), already quoted in chapter 9, this aspect of stealth games is what makes them queer: "They [stealth games] let me cooperate with a situation, ask me to take into account all the moving parts and my role in them. The way men behave in stealth games feels closer to what I hope my own masculinity is: thoughtful, adaptable, aware of myself and my effect on the world around me. Shooter masculinities close off possibilities, make an enemy out of the world; stealth masculinities place me firmly in the world and let me nurture it into something new."

In light of this evidence, MacLeod's point can be taken further: rather than just "cooperate with a situation," stealth gameplay is about generating certain situations in the first place, about bringing situations into being so they may play out in Agent 47's favor. *Hitman*'s richly detailed game world in conjunction with the core mechanic of disguising/passing allows the more recent installments in the series to simulate a mode of power that intervenes in a given social reality in a way that creatively coproduces how that reality will come to be perceived in the first place. This modus operandi cannot be unequivocally associated with one political camp or another and, rather, should be understood as a generalized mode of how power operates. Brian Massumi articulates this power to modulate how exactly reality comes into being/prehension through the concept of *ontopower*: "Ontopower is not a negative power, a power-over. It is a power-to: a power to incite and orient emergence that insinuates itself into the pores of the world where life is just stirring, on the verge of being what it will become, as yet barely there. It is a

positive power for bringing into being (hence the prefix 'onto')" (2015a, vii–viii). Ontopower is exercised in the phase of existence that was earlier called "bare activity," where a perceptible reality is only just forming—and being onterpowerfully in-, re- and deformed—before it settles into a recognizable state of affairs. As an example, Massumi interrogates the so-called doctrine of preemption, which consists in modulating a population's perception of the future by evoking, say, terrorist threats or economic crises to create uncertainty and thereby make the political present more malleable. In this way, the doctrine of preemption gives authorities a broader range of creative interventions, often with the goal of securitizing and militarizing civil society.

The queer gameplay of stealth games simulates ontopower differently: If *Hitman*, as we saw, confronts the player with a tightly knit network of social relations that are exclusionary at the beginning of each playthrough, the game subsequently trains the player to perceive the appearances and behavioral movements of various localized authorities and obstacles (like a kitchen assistant or therapist) as tactical resources that can be weaponized and used against the exclusionary environment itself. For that purpose, the social reality does not need to be fully destroyed (e.g., through force-on-force combat, as in shooting games). It only needs to be temporarily tweaked or suspended. Social stealth allows for the suspension of social reality under the condition that this suspension goes unnoticed; it thus creates a double experience in which reality is ontically changed while the experience of that change must be suppressed for others. That makes it possible for a social fiction (or lie) to be collectively produced or at least supported by the very same social group against which that fiction (or lie) is then deployed. Ultimately, this is how the tagline of *Hitman*—"Make the World Your Weapon"—needs to be understood: stealth is ontopowerful because it allows one's perception of the world to be weaponized against one's being in the world.

"Between 20 Percent and 40 Percent Asian": The Stupidity of Digital Whiteness

> Man is least himself when he talks in his own person.
> Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.
> —Oscar Wilde

Ontopower's mode of shaping perception is also evident in the way that *Hitman*'s camp aesthetic treats Agent 47's salient whiteness. The latter becomes

particularly notable when the assassin finds himself in social domains that the developers have racialized, presumably for the purposes of realism and verisimilitude. For example, Agent 47 can romp through the slums of Mumbai and take on various disguises and social identities of slum dwellers without drawing much attention to himself. In other missions, he can infiltrate a Southeast Asian pirate syndicate or disguise himself as service personnel in a Thai vacation hotel. It just works, at least in terms of game mechanics. But in such moments, the contrast between representational verisimilitude and the simplistic hiding mechanic makes itself felt again. The game makes these moments productive as a way of addressing the viscous whiteness of digital culture.

Many players notice the incongruity of Agent 47's "ethnic" disguises and find them disconcerting because they undermine certain assumptions about his race. The perceptual dilemma is rather well expressed in this exchange among four Reddit users:

> User 1: So in Bangkok if you lure the house staff to fix either the toilet or bed sheets and you knock out the male house staff Sofie [an NPC character] doesn't realize it. But how? That guy is Asian and 47 only has European nationality. Or Dubai where it would be so obvious because he's so pale. Did I miss something even after playing this long?
>
> User 2: Technically, 47 is part Asian, one of his father is chinese. But no, there's no lore reason. You could say that 47 is so good at impersonating others that he transcends race.
>
> User 3: He's 1/3rd Lion, 1/3rd Witch and 1/3rd Wardrobe.
>
> User 4: Another of his fathers is Kazakh, which is a weird ethnicity that sometimes gets lumped in as "Asian," or sometimes gets lumped in as "Slavic." So, that makes him somewhere between 20% and 40% Asian. Of course, he got a double-dose of European, with both a German and an Austrian father, and the last 20% is Colombian.
>
> User 1: Ah okay. Now I feel stupid for asking this question. (super_nova_91 2022)

Why stupid? Presumably for not knowing that, in fact, Agent 47 was mixed-race all along. Now that User 1 *does* know about Agent 47's complicated heredity, his disappearance into racialized social roles makes a lot more sense. *That's something!* It seems that User 1 is willing to unsee Agent 47's salient whiteness once it is made sufficiently plausible by the backstory of the five, ahem, *five* fathers. It should be noted here that the "World of Assassination" trilogy—despite all its over-the-top espionage clichés—does *not* repeat the hackneyed story of Agent 47's five fathers. This is something that the Reddit

users must have dug up from the earlier titles of the series. A collective effort was made to make the implausible seem self-evident. This short exchange points to the ontopowerful ways in which whiteness operates, also in and through *Hitman*.

The exchange shows first of all how malleably whiteness perceives race, and thus itself. For the group of Reddit users, race-as-perceived is partly conditioned by a dubitable discourse of race and heredity. But this explanatory discourse is mobilized only when they are confronted with a perceptual discrepancy between racial appearance and social domain to absorb and neutralize the perceptual contrast. Even the problem that other in-game characters—who presumably weren't briefed on Agent 47's genetic profile—aren't perturbed by Agent 47's salient whiteness has disappeared. Once the players have collectively unseen the assassin's whiteness, it's gone. This way of selectively priming perception through naturalized racial logics is a crucial aspect of whiteness' ontopower. Thresholds for perceptual racialization are continuously calibrated to adjust concrete experience and white worldview to each other. As Arun Saldanha has suggested, "whiteness gathers its strength from being versatile" in this way (2007, 7). So this discussion of User 1's confusion is explicitly not to say that race is merely a "social construct," or discourse that shapes lives in a deterministic manner. Rather, "racial difference emerges through a host of processes at different levels of organization" (10). Race is an "event" that folds group behavior, material realities, aesthetic surfaces such as phenotypes, and discursive formations or theories of race into each other in complex ways (8). Race, understood as such a "machinic assemblage" that maintains itself as a sociomaterial process (9), *selectively occurs*—for instance, in Southeast Asian vacation resorts as Saldanha's ethnographic research and the Reddit conversation confirm.

The purpose of this selective and flexible thresholding of whiteness in and out of perception is to maintain what the philosopher Charles W. Mills has called an "epistemology of ignorance," a pattern of "cognitive dysfunctions" that are "psychologically and socially functional" (2022, 18). The last part is important: whiteness, or "white supremacy" to follow Mills, can function as a social ordering principle also because it relies on an epistemology that makes it psychologically disappear. The Reddit users quoted here are entrained by an acquired and collective "agreement to *mis*interpret the world" (18; emphasis in original), an understanding that the algorithmic whiteness that rears its ugly head must be explained away at all cost, if

necessary by means of the science fiction of genetic engineering. The power of whiteness consists partly in this mode of flexibly insinuating itself into worldly processes and partly in the willful ignorance of its own selective perceptions. The novelist Nella Larsen captured this well in her novel *Passing* when the character Irene, a Black woman passing as white, explains that her successful passing also depends on the willful ignorance of those who believe themselves to be white: "White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means: fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a Gypsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know" (Larsen 2010, 113). She couldn't possibly know, Irene thinks, because she assumes that the woman is white. But the woman *does* know because she is also black and passing as white. Unlike the Reddit users, these two women are indeed very much aware that people's perception is easily twisted by their collective desires and misconceptions. And they know further that perception will latch onto and operationalize the "most ridiculous" assumed markers of race to create and maintain whiteness as a functional sociomaterial assemblage, including back stories about five fathers.

There's more reason to believe that our Reddit users aren't the sharpest knives in the drawer. User 1's self-deprecating *aha*-moment betrays the fact that they must have considered Agent 47's disguises unproblematic and convincing until Agent 47 went ethnic in Thailand. And User 2's comment regarding Agent 47's ability to "transcend race" encourages User 1 to return to an unproblematic appreciation of whiteness. This ability to "transcend race" points to another aspect of Saldanha's concept of whiteness—namely, the individualistic commitment to and presumed capacity for existential self-transformation among whites (2007, 12).

Yet, as the present reading suggests, Agent 47's attempts at existential self-transformation through social stealth comically fail, at least representationally. Agent 47 does not become hypervisibly white *only* in an "ethnic" or racialized social domain. The series goes to great lengths to make his disguises seem implausibly fortuitous, exaggerated, and audacious. Its camp delights in creating "incongruous contrasts . . . between an individual/thing and its context/association" (Babuscio 1999, 119). This composition of risible

contrasts also sharpens camp's critical edge as it draws attention to both social norms and the acceptable range of deviation from them. Sure, Agent 47 clearly deviates too much from the appearance normatively expected of house staff in a Thai luxury resort. But the hilarious deviation from any sort of plausible social imperceptibility is so generalized in *Hitman* that one can't help but wonder why it becomes problematic mainly in relation to racialized social roles. The problem that the aesthetic incongruity—between a racialized social role and Agent 47's whiteness—points to is not (or not only) a lack of representational verisimilitude, but rather the game software's inability to adequately account for race in a social context in which it matters. In doing so, *Hitman* queerly and critically reproduces a major problem of digital culture more generally. Indeed, one could say that the disguise mechanic in *Hitman* is outdated also because it is a procedural remnant of utopian internet discourses of the 1990s, which naively celebrated the "utterly color-blind anonymity on the new frontiers of cyberspace" (quoted in Chun 2021, 11). Cyberspace, it was believed in "hopeful ignorance," would allow us to tailor our identities as easily as Agent 47 changes outfits (2, passim).

In *Discriminating Data*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun suggests that this "hopeful ignorance is not simply innocent" (2021, 11). Nor is it a thing of the past. Chun shows that Big Data companies have developed algorithmic systems that claim to be "color-blind" and thus do not explicitly register an individual's race, presumably because race is a "social construct" rather than a biological reality. At the same time, however, these systems can make use of so-called *proxies* for race, that is, other data points from which an individual's race can be inferred. For example, depending on where you live, your postal code might be such a proxy. And in *Hitman*, a person's profession can become another visible proxy for their race that the game's procedural rules simply ignore. As Chun argues, this way of "'ignoring' explicit markers of race amplifies—rather than alleviates—racism. Not only does it lead to a situation in which racism is naturalized; it also embeds whiteness as default" (20). This is another example of how whiteness can persist precisely by denying itself. Saldanha's "viscous" whiteness betokens, among other things, this ontopowerful combination of discursive detachment and operational stickiness (2007, 10).

Of course, *Hitman* understood as game software functions very differently from Big Data companies. But Chun's research is a helpful point of departure for arguing that *Hitman*'s incongruous camp aesthetic invites a critical

reflection on the algorithmic logic of whiteness as default. The ironic combination of a ludicrously simplistic game mechanic, a hyperwhite avatar and photorealistic, culturally specific settings amplifies the contrast between the aesthetic surface of the simulated world and the implicit logic of the software that animates this world. The clarity with which *Hitman*'s stealth mechanics fall short of any sense of aesthetic realism can be experienced as the game's queer critique of its own software's implicit whiteness. A player with a somewhat queer sensibility might find it harder than the Reddit users to resolve the tension between an implausible success in gameplay—the house staff disguise *does* work!—with the undeniable failure in verisimilitude and realism. These moments of racial passing, which both succeed (mechanically) and fail (aesthetically) at the same time, are queer flash points in the process of denaturalizing Agent 47's prototypical whiteness. Specifically, they are queer in the sense established by Judith Butler in her reading of Larsen's *Passing*: "As a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, 'queering' works as the exposure within language—an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language—of both sexuality and race. . . . In [this] instance, queering is what upsets and exposes passing. . . ." (2011, 130–131). Similarly, Agent 47's queer moments of failed-successful racial passing disrupt the aesthetic surface of the software, thereby "betraying what ought to remain concealed"—namely, the software's procedural whiteness. As a playful analog of reality, *Hitman* teaches how whiteness operates in and through digital procedures even as their interfaces offer a diverse range of representations.

More specifically, the disjunctive conjunction of Agent 47's unconvincing social stealth queerly betrays the functional integration of two kinds of collective irrationality: *racial stupidity* and *artificial stupidity*. In her book *How to Be Less Stupid About Race*, the sociologist Crystal M. Fleming draws on Mills's notion of epistemology of ignorance to argue that "racial stupidity involves the misrepresentation, minimization, denial, and justification of racial domination" (2018, 11). People may not have acquired it intentionally, but as a social phenomenon, racial stupidity "is the result of intentional actions of European colonists and enslavers who sought to justify their capitalist exploitation of non-Europeans through the myth of white superiority" (11). Indeed, as a sociologist, Fleming observes that "racist societies socialize all of us to be racial idiots, insofar as we are exposed to forms of racial ignorance" (35). But crucially, in white supremacist societies, it is white people's

ignorance that "gets routinely repackaged as credible, authoritative 'knowledge,' even as 'science'" (35). (Science fiction will also do in certain contexts.)

Regardless, then, of whether the quoted Reddit users are themselves racialized as white or not, they participate in the collective reproduction of white theories of heredity and the race-transcending self-transformation to eliminate an aesthetic contrast that begs to be perceived. This much has been demonstrated already, but it may be worth pointing out once more that—even though the salty tone of this chapter may suggest as much—the charge of racial stupidity is decidedly *not* an assessment of any one individual's cognitive abilities or lack thereof. The irrationalities of whiteness are *emergent* and *collectively produced* in complex racializing assemblages as theorized by Saldanha.

To move on, the main point here is that, in digital culture, this collective, emergent *racial* stupidity is ontopowerfully coproduced and amplified by what game developers call *artificial* stupidity (Lidén 2003, 41). Creating good or optimal AI for the opponents and other NPCs in a video game is a challenge because AI can easily be too intelligent. "Creating an NPC that can beat a human player is relatively easy" (42). Consider that hardly any human is able to beat the best chess computers in the world these days. Not fun. In the context of gaming software for a consumer market, AI is too intelligent when it makes a game prohibitively difficult or unnecessarily complicated. In stealth games specifically, a too-good AI might spot the player's avatar at the slightest mistake or keep searching them for too long periods and in all the right places (because, of course, the software always knows where the avatar is in the game space). The game *Alien: Isolation* (Sega 2014) is a concrete example of this. In this stealth game, the player has to escape the eponymous monster of the *Alien* franchise. However, the AI that controlled the alien was so frustratingly good that, arguably, it became unfair. For many players, the AI of the alien enemy "broke the game" (see Švelch 2020). On the other end of the intelligence spectrum, there are NPCs that are so stupid that they fail to spot the avatar even when they are standing right beside them, that always search for the avatar in the wrong places—or fail to observe their incongruous whiteness.

Such artificial stupidity needs to be finely calibrated to enable a challenging, yet rewarding gameplay experience. Lidén calls it "the art of intentional mistakes" (41); that is, of programming mistakes that seem realistic within the

game world and not like artifacts of bad software design. As a good example of this, consider that many enemy NPCs in shooting games are programmed to have bad aim. Only every third shot of theirs or so actually hits the avatar, which makes the game easier and also adds tension by means of the "bullet tracers flying past the player's head" (43).[2] Now, many video games are artificially stupid about race in that they for instance identify warring factions as different "races" and formulate their various gameplay affordances in essentialist terms (see, e.g., Monson 2012; Aguilera 2022). And indeed, functional gameplay mechanics require the artificial stupidity of the software to make common cause with racial stupidity, as introduced previously. More generally, it is highly questionable whether any gaming AI is capable of adequately modeling and simulating the complexity of racialization and its impact on human relations, although this does not rule out the possibility of intelligent narrative representations of race in video games.

In this general respect, *Hitman*'s "World of Assassination" trilogy is no exception. Its NPCs are as artificially-racially stupid as those of many other games. But its commitment to an archaic hiding mechanic, in combination with its exaggerated camp aesthetic, allows it to comically highlight what is usually smoothly integrated and covered up. It queerly plays the integration of racial and artificial stupidity for laughs, putting the plausibility of its core gameplay mechanic at stake to clarify that it is *not* clothes that "make the man," but rather a collectivized racial delusion. Yet, RuPaul Charles's dictum that "we're all born naked and the rest is drag" is very much correct if "the rest" is thought to include the racial and artificial stupidities that allow us to selectively twist our perceptions of the world. Whiteness is bad drag, and it relies on our collective racial stupidity.

The Reddit users can partially acknowledge this. Clearly, the game has lured them into what Gregory Bateson might call an explicit "metacommunicative" act (2000, 178–185). They find themselves discussing the premises of *Hitman*'s social stealth to come to an agreement on how those premises make the simulation game work in a rule-based manner. They clearly recognize that certain rules of social simulation seem to be selectively ignored by the game software. They are, as it were, "metagaming" social stealth, in the sense that they reflect upon the way in which the game "interfaces beyond itself" with the world, addressing the "discontinuities that emerge between the human experience of playing videogames and their nonhuman operations" (Garfield 2000, 16; Boluk and Lemieux 2017, 14, 4). But they only get

so far, unable to admit that the metagame of *Hitman*'s social stealth includes the premise called "whiteness" without believing in it. Instead, they remobilize whiteness to explain away the software's shortcomings. This is a testament to the force of white supremacy's "epistemology of ignorance" and shows how it can mobilize artificial stupidity to ontopowerfully reinforce the delusion of whiteness.

As Bateson points out in his "Theory of Play and Fantasy," the metacommunicative acts of play are profoundly similar to therapeutic settings (2000, 191). Play and therapy both allow for a reflected or explicit metacommunicative acts that shift behaviors, as well as their psychological premises within a relatively bounded space. But both play and therapy can fail in this regard. The Reddit users fail to see digital whiteness because the "normopathic condition" of whiteness makes them rationalize any aesthetic incongruity by resorting to the premises of whiteness that enable them to assign the avatar, Agent 47, certain *properties* limited to his extraordinary *person* that allow him to selectively, that is *volitionally*, transcend race (Manning 2020, 62).

In contrast, the important argumentative point here is that User 1's act of false understanding is precisely not that of a single volitional and rational individual. Whiteness is collectively and selectively produced in a machinic assemblage of race that emerges and reemerges from the complex mutual inclusion of the group subjectivities of gamers, the digital procedures of game software and online forums as well as the continuing circulation of white pseudoknowledge that compensates for flaws in the "logic" of white supremacy. And so, against their best aesthetic intuition, User 1 retreats into the collective irrationality of whiteness.

Let's not waste this opportunity. *Hitman* lets us experience stealth at its most aestheticized. The game pushes toward a limit point of the aesthetics of stealth, where simulated imperceptibility becomes so queerly hypervisible that its social and technological conditions of possibility begin to stand out. At that limit, stealth unmasks itself. *Hitman*'s campy social stealth lets us see through the deceptive facade of digital culture and gives an apt, albeit comical, experience of its procedural whiteness. At that limit of the aestheticization of stealth, the utmost spectacularization of the imperceptible, *Hitman* throws shade at digital culture's crunchy drag and sheds light on the algorithmic whiteness hiding in the closet of the blackbox. *Hitman*'s incongruous social stealth clarifies experientially that software, too, prehends selectively according to programmed thresholds of perception, and that its interfaces

can dissimulate those thresholds. In this way, digital technology ontopowerfully creates differential prehensions of race that serve whiteness.

The Tactical Duplicities of Stealth Gameplay

What consequences does this association with ontopower have for the more general interpretation of stealth that this book advances? Is it possible to evaluate stealth as a practice of queer resistance? Or is it always already complicit with oppressive and violent modes of power? The uncomfortably queer answer is "both . . . and . . .": ontopower also suspends—or sidesteps—the law of the excluded middle that makes it possible to provide unequivocal, mutually exclusive answers. Instead, stealth embraces tactical duplicity.

This chapter and the previous one have shown that stealth gameplay can provide queer players with recognition and refuge. Yet stealth gameplay does not in many cases qualify as an instance of countergaming as described by Alexander Galloway: it neither "replaces play with aesthetics" (2006, 115)—rather, it fuses them—nor does it challenge gameplay conventions through "radical action" (125). Accordingly, stealth also does not fit into one of Bonnie Ruberg's characterizations of "queer play" as the kind of play that "embraces the powerful act of playing the 'wrong' way" either (2019, 18). Stealth gamers usually enact a game's mechanics rather faithfully. This is part of what makes stealth uncomfortably queer: Its care is not primarily for the dividing lines clearly drawn into a political landscape, nor for the ideals associated with one political orientation or another. Rather, stealth is utterly pragmatic, in that it will take from an oppressive order what it needs to insert its own mode of existence into that order, often with the aim of dis- or reordering the status quo. It could be said, then, that stealth proceeds in ways similar to *disidentification* in the sense established by José Muñoz: "Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure [like identification] nor strictly opposes it [like counteridentification]; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz 1999, 11).

Since the present argument is less preoccupied with identity as position than with *processes of individuation* and their *processual effects* (including processes of identification), Muñoz's point shall be rephrased in slightly more processual terms: From the perspective of the queer political practice of disidentification, various movements of adversarial impetus and goals may

processually overlap or even mutually include one another. To wit, Muñoz's interpretation of passing largely supports this interpretation of *Hitman*'s use of disguises as an instance of strategic duplicity: "Passing is often not about bold-faced opposition to a dominant paradigm or a wholesale selling out to that form. Like disidentification itself, passing can be a third modality where a dominant structure is co-opted, worked on and against. The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form" (Muñoz 1999, 108). Similarly, *Hitman* can be played without identifying or counteridentifying with Agent 47. Rather, the players operating this avatar are initially tasked to work with an exclusionary social reality and distort it, discovering along the way how the software itself distorts reality according to its own limitations.

Forever nimble, adaptable, and flexible, stealthy subjectivity is surely conducive to queer survival. Forever nimble, adaptable, and flexible, stealthy subjectivity also articulates an ideal neoconservative (and neoliberal) subjectivity (see chapters 6–8). Ultimately, then, the queerness of stealth gameplay results from the uncomfortable process of individuation-in-between and the *immanent ethics* required to prevent the both/and of strategic duplicity from devolving into the both/and of hypocrisy. Stealth gameplay requires the player to evaluate each of their in-game actions in terms of the ontopowerful effects that it enables. The ethical question of stealth gameplay is: How will one's play style insert itself into an ongoing process of worlding? Instead of letting us safely interpret their politics or ethics in unequivocal terms from an external viewpoint, stealth games—with their emphasis on the responsiveness of the world, the relative freedom, and hence the responsibility of the player—can return the question to the player and ask them to evaluate their own prehensions. The guiding question is: What happens next, and how to value it? In other words, the overlapping questions crucial for this approach to gameplay are: What are the values that one affirms? How does one act in such a way that one's inflections of the world affirm these values?

Raising these questions, stealth gameplay encourages players to conceive an ethos and to enact it. In terms of gameplay, this stood out the most clearly in *Dishonored* (discussed in chapter 9), where choosing an ethos can be as simple as starting a new playthrough with the intention of playing entirely nonlethally: all simulated life is valued. What world are you going to bring into existence? Approached in this way, stealth gameplay fosters a practical ethics of worlding in real time. As such, it can nudge player subjectivity into

acknowledging its participation in hegemonic structures and continuously negotiate that relation. In many stealth games such as *Watch Dogs: Legion* and *Hitman*, the player is encouraged to include the computational functioning of the software and its very own thresholds of perception in their ethical elaborations through stealth. Stealth is thus always an "ethico-aesthetic" paradigm (Guattari 2000). The politicality of such subjectivity does not reside in a particular position, to be mediated and steadfastly held on to in the arena of representational politics, but rather in its engagement with a complex world and its focus on the immediate effects of that engagement.

Instead of an identifiable position, then, the queer politics of stealth affirm an immanent outside: an existential excess that can be neither subsumed under an oppressive order, nor excluded from it. A nonconforming creature is always in excess of what the norm allows to be prehended. A radical contingency. Rather than embrace antinormativity in an act of open resistance, however, the queer politics of stealth sidesteps the normative world to affirm its own excess and, through that act, repotentialize a world impoverished by normative being. The fact that the stealthy avatar is always bound to exceed into escape and clandestinity should not be understood as a political weakness. Rather, it marks stealth's commitment to "fugitive planning" toward a sociality that remains alien to normative society, even as that society proliferates norms to allow assimilation and respectability for those whose deviance has become recuperable (Harney and Moten 2013). This sociality is of an "undercommons," a "nonplace" immanent to the oppressive order (42), that elaborates modes of living that directly value excess, that undeniable queerness at the innermost outside of existence. The queer political ethos of stealth gameplay values first and foremost the world's persistent production of difference, the "general antagonism" of existence (109–110). It affirms that value through a mode of life whose aim it is "not to suppress the general antagonism but to experiment with its informal capacity," to improvise the peaceful integration with other modes of existence (109). Not in subdued tolerance of hostility. But in persistent, ontopowerful entanglement with the world and the desire to make more difference that affirms (more) difference. The queer political practice of stealth is duplicitous in yet another sense, then: in its persistence on differentiation, it is open to redouble and overcome itself, at the condition that it may surreptitiously pull that which rejects it into a vortex of change. No permission asked, no recognition required.

11 Stealthy Together: Coda on Insistent Belonging

Throughout this book, stealth has been a fairly individualist mode of existence. The reader has seen that stealth is often the tactical refuge of a lone individual placed in a hostile environment. This environment usually obeys an exclusionary order that assigns the lone individual an outsider status. The nonconforming individual is an excess, an "unassimilable residue" that must be suppressed (Foucault 1995, 282). In this view, stealth is the self-denying refuge of someone who does not belong. For certain strands of stealth aesthetics, this is the starting point for individualistic power and revenge fantasies that feed and exacerbate the exclusionary order. This insight should not be easily dismissed. But the world, that manifold of prehensions, is always in excess of what a single order can hold and recognize as belonging to itself. And this excess, too, is bound to feed back into the world. Stealth is an expression of this insistence of the excluded other within an oppressive order. This is a first indication of the dissensus-based sociality of stealth. Yet stealth can also emphasize collective action in solidarity. You have already encountered *Watch Dogs: Legion* (WDL) and its gameplay conceit of creating an underground resistance collective that relies on the various skills and social perks of its members. This coda returns to TV to foreground these two aspects of stealth's duplicitous sociality. Considering the 2015 "graffiti bombing" of *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), it suggests that the imperceptible excess belongs right to the processual core of collective social living, subsisting in spite of being refused, insistently valuing difference and inclusion as processual necessities. In or as stealth, this excess immanently reworlds the world.

Following the increasingly nationalist political discourses of the early twenty-first century, the notion of the "homeland" has come to fulfill (once

again) the role of a privileged domain that is accessible to those who are ethnically and culturally commensurate with the majority, or those willing to assimilate to an exclusionary majoritarian order. There is an inside and an outside: a cultural interior of sameness or assimilation and an exterior of Otherness. The TV series *Homeland* (Showtime 2011–2020) posits such an understanding of the homeland at the core of its political project. The initial dramatic impetus of the series is provided as the clear division between inside and outside comes under the threat: Could a US marine—"one of us"—really have been turned into a terrorist—"one of them"? Could the threat come from within? Yes, it can, which is why the borders of the homeland have to be protected at all cost, even and especially in the exterior of Otherness (cf. every season of *Homeland*).

In October 2015, *Homeland* premiered its fourth season with two episodes partially set in a Lebanese refugee camp. To add "authenticity" to the set for the refugee camp, the show's producers sought to recruit a few "Arabian street artists" and asked them to add graffiti to the set based on the following instructions: "(1) the graffiti has to be apolitical (2) you cannot copy the images [from actual refugee camps] because of copyright infringement (3) writing 'Mohamed is the greatest,' is okay of course" (Amin, Kapp, and Karl 2015). The producers of *Homeland* understood correctly that graffiti adds texture and mood to a shot. And that is just how the Arabic graffiti was meant to belong: as an intensifier of a feeling of Otherness in the construction of a fictional camp. "Arabian street artists" were meant to be enlisted to reproduce their own discursive exclusion. The producers' mistake was to reduce Arabic script to a mere aesthetic surface. The three hired artists Heba Amin, Caram Kapp, and Don Karl (aka Stone), followed their instructions *almost* to the letter. As the artists' online documentation of the project shows, the graffiti in Arabic script that they sprayed all over the show's set carried such "apolitical" messages as "Homeland is racist," "There is no Homeland," and "This show does not represent the views of the artists" (Amin et al. 2015). On October 11, 2015, the cable network Showtime indeed showed an instance of *Homeland*'s protagonist, Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), walking past Arabic graffiti saying, "Homeland is racist."

What does this example tell us about a possible relation between stealth, sociality, and belonging? Actions such as this one can, at least partially, be seen as participating in a struggle over representation to the extent that they

resist the racist tropes that Western fiction continues to peddle to its audiences. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, for the action to be successful, the artists need to retrospectively uncover the representational aspect of their graffiti—the fact that Arabic script actually means something. Following this interpretation, the political efficacy of this furtive action resides in the fact that the producers of *Homeland* were made to perform their own ignorance of the geopolitical context that they were striving to represent realistically.

But the politicality of the action goes beyond this representational aspect. The artist collective temporarily accepted that their graffiti would be prehended as a mere aesthetic surface. As such, graffiti are conventionally characterized—and habitually perceived—as unauthorized marks left anonymously in public view, possibly on foreign private property. The producers' lack of care about the actual content of the graffiti suggests that their main interest was to transfer these habituated perceptual associations with graffiti—lack of authority, trespassing, and vandalism—to the context of the refugee camp. From the perspective of the dominant "us," then, the aesthetic surface is expressive enough that a translation (as a representational meaning-making process) is unnecessary, counterproductive even: the reduction of text to texture allows *Homeland* to aesthetically articulate "the Other" without explicitly calling them that. That's a sneaky processual approach, too. And it shows that an exclusionary majoritarian order *needs* and relies on discursive holes for its operations of power.

The graffiti artists, by contrast, stealthily moved into that blind spot—carefully put in place by the producers themselves—to call out *Homeland*'s bigotry without showing themselves (until, of course, they did show themselves). The crucial political act is to reject the notion that the discursive hole should be empty, that the blind spot didn't matter because there was nothing to see there anyway. Instead, the graffiti artists filled it with the excess that was not allowed to belong, that was relegated to the space of the Other, even as it was enlisted to produce that space. In other words, the stealthy artist-activists surreptitiously wove a series of negative prehensions into the event fabric of *Homeland* to affirm an alternative mode of existence in the very midst of the majoritarian order that denied that existence. Considered under this aspect, the later moment of translation, of referential meaning-making, is but one step in a much longer processual engagement with belonging.

When the artists revealed the meaning of their graffiti, the result was a powerful shock to thought on the self-declared "inside": "But we—the so-called outside—have been here all along," the artists insisted.

The moment of revelation functions like a catalyst that results in a spiraling out of control of the inside-outside logic of belonging. The action is, first of all, an irreverent dismissal of the representational regime that supports the exclusionary notion of the homeland. Your ignorance is our refuge, the graffiti say. Your violent construction of "us versus them" is where we hide, resolutely chipping away at it from within. Moreover, the graffiti are an insistent reminder that the images that make up *Homeland*—or at least the shots of the refugee camp—do not and cannot fully belong to their producers. Yet—and this is the truly affirmative moment, this is what sparks joy—the producers cannot disown these images either. They are also and undeniably of their making. They belong to them. That shot of the show's executive producer and star, Claire Danes, walking past graffiti stating that "Homeland is racist" will gloriously, joyfully remain. The joyful impetus of this action comes not so much (or, well, perhaps *just* as much) from a sense of successful trickery as from the fact that this reformulation of the question of belonging is utterly nonexclusive: this belongs to all of us; this is ours, together. The action slides two contrasting worldviews and their attendant modes of existence into one process of creation, with the more generative one harnessing the unknowing other as a lever into prominence, like a space vessel using a planet's gravitational field to slingshot itself onward on its journey.

As the territorial discourse of *Homeland* becomes unstable, so does the discursive territory of the homeland. The point is not that the spatial, cultural, and ethnic divisions between inside and outside do not exist; they surely do, not least because they continue to be violently put in place and maintained. The point is that the homeland and its desire for divisions are in no way foundational or given. The graffiti action insists that there is no such thing as a clearly demarcated interior that would belong to and could be controlled by its self-declared purveyors. Rather, "inside," "outside," "they," "us," all of us, everything are swept up and mutually included in process, for process does not exclude anything that pertains to it. In the process of mutual inclusion and creative participation, one is always becoming other than what one is. Whether one believes it or not is secondary.

This is what stealth practices in art or community-building do: they surreptitiously open the world to its own self-difference, here and now. Stealth

can be a mode of answering the call for difference from within, of insistently folding the denied excess back into our collective social living. Processually speaking, then, the moment of revelation in the *Homeland* graffiti bombing can be understood as an invitation. An invitation to test the limits of our perception, to explore that which we do not yet know how to perceive and, by extension, think. Stealth points to the unseen-unthought—the immanent outside—at the very core of any order.

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Notes

Chapter 1

1. See, for instance, Lee Yong Baek's video piece "Angel Soldier," Liu Bolin's photo series "Hiding in the City," Simon Menner's photo series "Camouflage," and Desiree Palmen's "Surveillance Camera Camouflage" project. On Hito Steyerl's video piece "How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File," see Pape 2017. None of these projects is an example of so-called furtive art, which aims to be imperceptible rather than treating imperceptibility as a theme (see Ritter 2005).

2. Muñoz provides this useful formulation in a different context: "all queers are not the stealth-universal-white-gay-man invoked in queer antirelational formulations" (2009, 94). The qualification "gay" has been omitted here because stealthing is committed by people with penises, regardless of sexual orientation.

3. This particular epistemological meaning of the term "stealth" is also evidenced in the research of O'Kane, Green, Long, and Reid (2019) on "stealth coronal mass ejections." Coronal mass ejections (CMEs) or "solar storms" are ejections of large amounts of electrically charged particles that can "endanger[] satellites and infrastructure on Earth" (Clark 2022). *Stealth* CMEs "are eruptions from the Sun that have no obvious low coronal signature" and therefore cannot be forecast (O'Kane et al. 2019, 1). This unpredictability means that stealth CMEs pose a particularly high risk to electric infrastructures. Current research innovations in "space weather forecasting" aim to make stealth CMEs predictable and thereby eliminate the epistemological lag to which the term "stealth" refers here (see Clark 2022).

Chapter 2

1. In this book, as in the cited literature on this topic, "Stealth" with a capital "S" refers to the specific defense project described here. The noncapitalized word "stealth" refers more broadly to the concept of tactical imperceptiblity as developed in these pages.

2. A final interesting point to note here is that, in terms of percentage of the overall corpus, the current frequency of "stealth" is not much higher than it was in 1808. Besides the fact that the word is a recrudescent archaicism, it is not clear how this is best explained, but an attempt to do so will be made in chapter 8, which focuses on contemporary portrayals of the American Revolution as an achievement of stealth and conspiracy thinking.

3. It's possible to note here the influence of evolutionary theory on Whitehead. Analogous to early evolutionary theory (but far from neo-Darwinism), Whitehead thinks actual reality as a system of interlocking processes that are selected for further processual elaboration based on how well the elements of that process adapt to one another. So, importantly, this account wouldn't say that, say, the olive tree has adapted itself to warmer climes. Rather, the olive tree is a processual unity achieved through the mutual prehension of climate, soil conditions, and living organism.

4. The "concrete" is "that which has grown together," from the Latin *con-crescere* (Whitehead 1967b, 174). In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead states that "the 'production of novel togetherness' is the ultimate notion embodied in the term 'concrescence'" (1978, 21). So, in a literal and conceptual sense, concreteness is how the world has grown together *just so*, out of a treasure trove of incompossible abstract potentials. This also means that the abstract is not the opposite of the concrete. Rather, the abstract is one of the progenitors of the concrete. The opposite of the concrete is the discrete (cf. Deleuze 1978); chapter 3 will pick up on this. At this point, it may be added for purposes of clarification that many process philosophies require an explanation of potentialities' immanence to reality. Bergson and Deleuze use the terms "virtual" and "actual" (as two aspects of reality) to make a distinction analogous to what Whitehead calls the abstract (also "pure potential") and the concrete.

5. The term "prehensity" is taken from Mark Hansen's *Feed Forward* because, as a word, "it stuck": it helped concretize the thoughts articulated here. It is given its own and fairly basic definition in the present account, also because the term is never defined or even used frequently in *Feed-Forward,* even though it is claimed to be one of the "four distinct, yet intimately interrelated aspects of Whitehead's speculative empiricism that are essential for developing a neutral theory of experience capable of explaining the impact of twenty-first-century media on worldly sensibility and the reconceptualization of the human this facilitates" (Hansen 2015, 29).

6. As Whitehead states, "Concrescence is nothing else than the 'real internal constitution' of the actual occasion in question" (1978, 212). The two terms may thus be used synonymously. "Actual occasion" and "actual entity" are also synonyms: "An instance of concrescence is termed an 'actual entity—or, equivalently, an 'actual occasion.'" (1978, 211).

Chapter 3

1. To be specific: "Maturation is the lowest degree of the psychic individuation of life. The invention of cognitive schema exemplifies a higher degree. The invention of axiomatics—schema for the translation of cognitive schema into each and out of each other—is a still higher degree. Allagmatics, the metaschematizing of axiomatics, is the highest degree, corresponding to what Deleuze and Guattari call conceptual invention, and Guattari in his solo work 'meta-modelization'" (Massumi, De Boever, Murray, and Roffe 2009, 42).

2. To clarify, Bernhard Rieder (2020, 59) writes: "Using the vocabulary of Actor-Network Theory, we could say that an object's technicity realizes 'its script, its "affordance', its potential to take hold of passersby and force them to play roles in its story" (Latour 1999, 177). Simondon's philosophy, however, cautions us not to move too quickly to the heterogeneous but flat assemblages that Actor-Network Theory conceives. In fact, Latour's more recent *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* follows Simondon in arguing that such modes delineate their own substances in ways that are more profound than mere incommensurability between language games because they admit other beings than words into the fold of what makes a mode specific (Latour 2013, 20). Being itself is marked by difference, and as Peters (2015) claims, 'ontology is not flat; it is wrinkly, cloudy, and bunched'" (30).

3. It is worth noting again that this genealogical sketch in no way claims to grasp the technical genealogy of the digital as a whole. That would not only be practically impossible but also theoretically unsound. Simondon points out that the evolutionary process of concretization is also—and perhaps somewhat counterintuitively—a "process of differentiation" (36). That is, the increased internal convergence of a technical system produced by an evolutionary leap also produces a divergence of this technical system from other possible lines of development (a bit like how the species *Homo sapiens* emerged as it split from other human species). The present account traces only one of the many ways in which digital technology and human culture have coevolved.

4. The translator's note for "icodynamics" reads as follows: "The neologism is derived from the Greek terms *eikon*, 'semblance', 'likeness', and *dynamis*, 'power'" (Virilio 2002, 144).

5. At the same time, the present account remains cautious of Farocki's tendency to emphasize the autonomy of machines, moving him closer to the second problematic attitude toward technology described by Simondon. See Hoel (2018).

6. Costikyan (2013) distinguishes between various types and sources of uncertainties, including the following: performative uncertainty (21), solver's uncertainty (25), player unpredictability (29), analytical complexity (39), randomness and hidden information (43), and uncertainty of perception (70). See also the chapter "Sources of Uncertainty" (2013, 71–103).

7. There are many theories that consider art, and even culture more generally, as forms of play, often grounded in considerations of mimesis (for an overview, see Beyst 2011). The present account largely agrees with the general observation of analogy between play and art, but it emphasizes lived abstraction as the crucial aspect of the analogy rather than mimesis. Furthermore, play might more accurately be considered a *condition* for the development of art rather than a fully commensurable phenomenon.

8. Hence, the emphasis on abstraction rather than mimesis in the previous note.

Chapter 4

1. Focusing on "cinema's evolution via the electronic arts," Murray similarly demonstrates that "the new media screen arts, while not always dialoguing directly with the Baroque, consistently embody and display the tissue of baroque paradigms, from the dynamics of serial accumulation and the trauma of temporal folds to the cultural promise of what [Murray] will call digital incompossibility that makes quake the previously confident stature of single-centered subjectivity" (Murray 2008, 17).

2. Further studies that explore this relation are Buci-Glucksmann (1994), Bal (1999), Calabrese (1992), Cubitt (1996), Munster (2006).

3. On the marginalization of the Baroque, see Ndalianis (2004, 7).

4. Concomitantly, such an ecological approach required the consolidation of the traditionally separate disciplines of physical optics, geometrical optics, and physiological optics—a disciplinary division that cuts the parts of an environment off from one another and obscures the relations that constitute perception.

5. Gibson (2015, 63–64; emphasis in original): "When the Renaissance painters discovered the procedures for perspective representation, they very properly called the method *artificial perspective*. They understood that this had to be distinguished from the natural perspective that governed the ordinary perception of the environment. Since that time we have become so picture-minded, so dominated by pictorial thinking, that we have ceased to make the distinction. But to confuse pictorial perspective with natural perspective is to misconceive the problem of visual perception at the outset. The so-called cues for depth in a picture are not at all the same as the information for surface layout in a frozen ambient array, although pictorial thinking about perception tempts us to assume that they are the same. Pictures are artificial displays of information frozen in time."

6. This dilemma of "asymmetrical warfare" was one of the arguments for the US invasion of Iraq. In an address to the nation on March 17, 2003, George W. Bush stated: "Terrorists and terror states do not reveal [their] threats with fair notice, in formal declarations—and responding to such enemies only after they have struck first is not self-defense, it is suicide" (Bush 2003). The alternative is to preemptively strike first, *without* knowing exactly where the enemy is (Massumi 2015a).

7. For Gibson, the term "awareness" does not imply consciousness (2015, 238).

8. One odd, yet important rule of the game is that security cameras can view the player but never alert Albion to the viewers' presence. This is explained as a fundamental exploit of DedSec's antisurveillance hack: The hack blocks the prehension of the player character who holds the DedSec smart device for hacking the city. So when the player hacks a camera that has the player in its frame, the interface will only show a pixelated blur instead of the player character. This same rule, as well as its narrative explanation, can be found in *Cyberpunk 2077*.

9. This makes *Watch Dogs: Legion* very different from, for instance, the third-person action adventure games that use the continuity of the "following camera" to create the impression of an unbroken tracking shot (Nitsche 2008, 93). The continuity of the following camera is so imposing that the—quite unstealthy—action-adventures *God of War* (2018) and *God of War: Ragnarok* (2022) went so far as to extend the aesthetic of the unbroken tracking shot into the cut scenes, creating the impression of a continuous, long take from the beginning of the game to its very end (excluding switches to the menu). Chapter 6 addresses how the technique of the tracking shot can contribute to the aesthetics of stealth.

10. In *The Open Work*, Umberto Eco writes about "Baroque form" that "its search for kinetic excitement and illusory effect leads to a situation where the plastic mass in the Baroque work of art never allows a privileged, definitive, frontal view; rather, it induces the spectator to shift his position continuously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects, as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation" (1989, 7). The multiperspectival aesthetic of WDL is a first reason for qualifying it as not only Baroque, but also what Eco calls an "open work."

11. In other stealth games, this kind of distributed agency figures as a core game mechanic. For example, the German developer Mimimi Games has made several real-time stealth tactics games, including *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun* (2016), *Desperados III* (2020), and *Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew* (2023). Following the formula established by the *Commandos* series, these games let the player go on stealth missions with usually three members (out of a crew of up to eight), each with different abilities and perks. A crucial game mechanic is the planning mode in which the player can assign a particular action to each team member without executing it yet. Once the plan is put in place, it can be carried out at the press of a button, thus launching a stealth attack from three directions at the same time. This game mechanic allows the player to orchestrate highly complex interventions in the game space, also due to the possibility of combining various team members' gameplay affordances in different ways.

Chapter 5

1. Many insightful volumes have been written on this topic. See, for example, Harvey (2005), MacLean (2017), and Massumi (2015b).

Chapter 6

1. On recent gamepads or controllers that have two control sticks, the left stick is conventionally assigned to the avatar's movement, whereas the right stick controls the camera. The same holds for games in first-person perspective, except that here, the point of view and point of action coincide, which somewhat restricts the potential for environmental analysis and contrapuntal movements.

2. For a playthrough of this mission, see https://youtu.be/HStaqYrafUo?t=2m20s.

3. Strictly speaking, the mission allows the "Panther" play style, which also requires "no detection" but allows silent, *lethal* takedowns.

4. The important point about affordances to be recalled here is that they are not attributes or properties of an entity, but rather relations between entities. See Gibson 119–120 (emphasis in original): "The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill. The verb *to afford* is found in the dictionary, but the noun *affordance* is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment. . . . [Affordances] have to be measured *relative to the animal*. They are unique for that animal. They are not just abstract physical properties. They have unity relative to the posture and behavior of the animal being considered."

5. This liminal moment, where the avatar is *almost* perceived, is technically implemented by differentiating the alertness levels of enemy AI and the associated AI behavior (McKeand 2022, 34). In many stealth games, there are three such levels: Enemy AI can be (1) "unaware and patrolling"; (2) "suspicious and searching" for a timed period, for instance when they briefly glimpse the avatar, see footprints on the ground, or hear footsteps; or (3) "fully alert and attacking" when they have detected the avatar (McKeand 2002, 21). This technical innovation, first established by *Thief: The Dark Project* (Eidos Interactive 1998) and *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami 1998), thus enables an intermediate AI state between full alertness and unawareness, which allows players to engage with the software's threshold of perception in a more dynamic manner.

6. It is artificially abstract because, as explained in chapter 4, video games (like many other games) are constructed to be indeterminate systems with uncertain outcomes.

7. See also Simondon (2020, 167): "The only concrete reality is the vital unit, which can in certain cases be reduced to a single being and which in other cases corresponds to an extremely differentiated group of multiple beings."

8. See O'Sullivan (2017) for an account of *televisual* long takes in general and the reception of the long take in *True Detective* in particular. O'Sullivan also discusses the use of long takes in *Looking* (HBO, 2014–2016), which he describes as "stealth long takes" (245 and 250). In O'Sullivan's argument, however, the term "stealth" is used

to refer to the inconspicuousness of the long take itself, particularly in comparison to *True Detective*'s "declarative" (245) or "spectacular" (250) long take. This is insightful in that it confirms once more the spectacular quality of stealth.

9. With regard to *True Detective*, it has been suggested that the shot is broken at the moment where the camera pans up to reveal a helicopter that passes over the scene. To be clear, I do not mean to reproduce arguments that consider a long take any less effective, or even inferior for being technically discontinuous. On the contrary, one may consider such long takes as impressive achievements in working around a technological restriction. However, the question of directorial achievement (behind the camera) is secondary to the present argument.

10. This also means that the mobile long take as discussed here is not subjective, as might be construed following, for instance, Pasolini (1980).

11. See Coley (2017): "The protagonists of these shows have lost control. For them, detection involves an act of probing that admits to being probed back, it involves an abductive rather than deductive form of investigation, a speculative mode of detection in which human subjectivity is carried away beyond itself. Here the detective is impelled, incited or allured by their media ecological circumstances, and it is precisely the detective's inability to control such encounters that makes them aesthetic. Media relations remain ungraspable, impossible to reduce to an anthropocentric environment, and the weirdness of its entanglements cannot be recuperated or rationalised."

12. It should be noted that the disrespect for chains of command and protocol is well established in crime fiction. Detectives in film and TV have been breaking with the abovementioned values of transparency and accountability for a long time. One may think of film noir protagonists such as Sam Spade, Phillip Marlowe, and "Dirty" Harry Callahan, who informed an entire film genre of corrupt or unconventional detectives. TV has also known its share of unconventional police detectives and mavericks before the turn of the century, such as in *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984–1989).

13. See Barker and Cottrel (2015) for a relevant argument that relates the following shot to a changed notion of masculinity.

14. See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* for such an approach. For a critical assessment, see Dean (2002).

15. For example, the Authorization for Use of Military Force of 2001 allows the US president to make use of "necessary and appropriate force" against enemies without congressional approval ("Joint Resolution"). It was invoked by Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump to authorize (arguably illegal) airstrikes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and many other foreign countries (see Calamur 2014).

16. On this issue, see Hito Steyerl's "Duty-Free Art," three-channel HD video, 2015. This artwork also contains excerpts from the stealth video game *Assassin's Creed Unity* (Ubisoft 2014).

17. For a concrete, nonfictional example, consider James O'Keefe's "Project Veritas" and its various undercover operations. The journalism performed by Project Veritas is controversial because it uses undercover investigation as its go-to process rather than, as required by journalistic codes of ethics, as a last resort when information cannot be gathered otherwise. In other words, stealth is this group's standard procedure rather than an exception. For more information, see Damann (2018) and Goss (2020).

Chapter 7

1. For a playthrough of this mission, see https://youtu.be/_zsqM5HUrdU?t=172.

Chapter 10

1. Peter von Matt describes Patricia Highsmith's Ripley novels in a similar way when he speaks of Ripley as constantly being on the "hellishly hot [*höllenheiß*] threshold of discovery" (von Matt 2013, 128). His discussion of Max Frisch's *Gantenbein* establishes a serial structure of repeated moments of discovery of the protagonist's secret. These moments of *anagnorisis* are then taken back to allow for continued attempts at staying undetected, which creates a serial process of fail-and-retry that is not unlike the repetition of trial-and-error in much stealth gameplay.

2. Kirk McKeand confirms this in his *History of the Stealth Game*: "If you can accept a bit of NPC idiocy, stealth games are a convincing illusion. Importantly, if enemies didn't have the memory reserves of a goldfish, stealth games would be a frustrating slog. It's a balancing act—AI must be convincing, but not too much so" (2022, 14).

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