Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

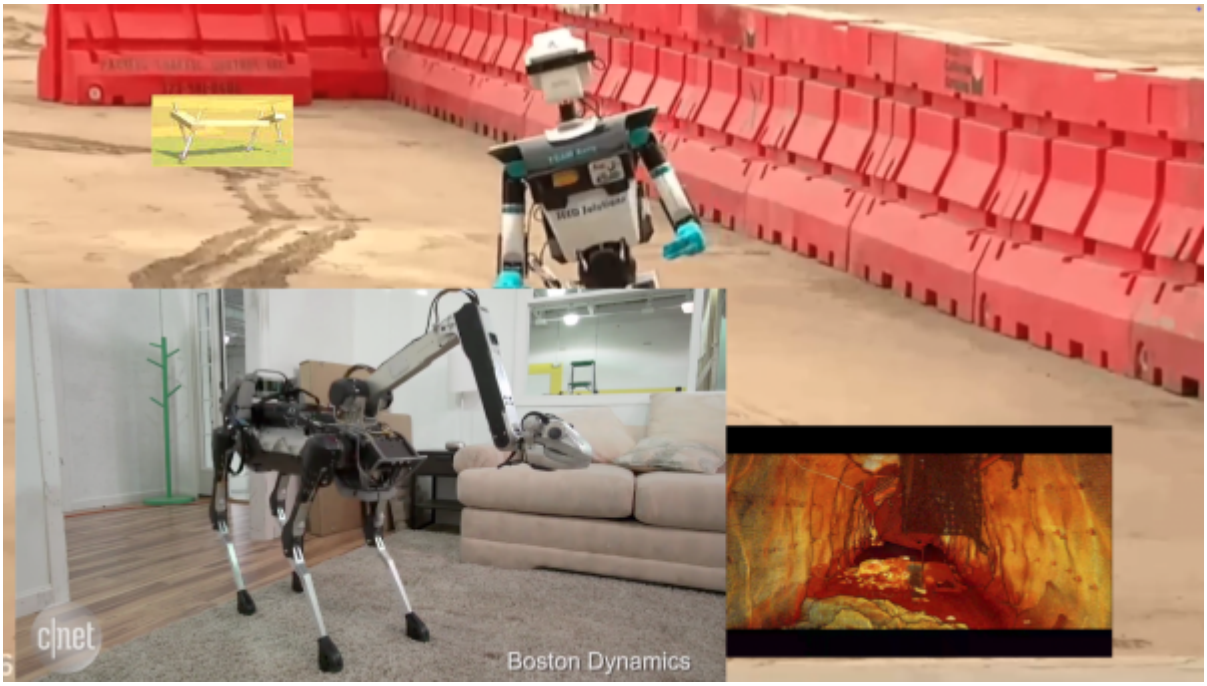
Spot® Instructions for Use – A Sabotage Manual

Community Self-Defense for Building a World Without Police (Dogs)

Cassandra Troyan

Spot, the yellow four-legged robot dog manufactured by Boston Dynamics, and its canine lookalikes, have become increasingly ubiquitous in daily life. It patrols and surveils university campuses, parks, and neighborhoods under the auspices of safety and innovation. Many are not fooled by this narrative and, in response to its presence, have taken Spot's removal into their own hands. The following text is a set of speculative abolitionist scenarios constructed by reappropriating the Boston Dynamics User Guide for Spot and shifting it into a manual of sabotage to be used instead against this carceral technology.





Meet Spot. See Spot dance. See Spot run. See Spot work.

Spot is a yellow quadruped robot created by Boston Dynamics, an American engineering and robotics company founded in 1992 as an offshoot of the MIT Leg Lab based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.[1] Spot's persona and physical likeliness is canine-inspired. Influenced by other working dog breeds who came before, Spot is a dependable coworker who is always there to get the job done, especially in places where human capabilities are lacking. In a promotional video from 2017, Spot went viral for persisting in its efforts to open a door without human intervention. Remember, Spot won't stop until the job is done.[2]

Coinciding with the release of an episode of *Black Mirror* featuring a killer robot-dog hunting down survivors in a post-apocalyptic landscape (*Metalhead*, Season 4), parallels were immediately drawn to the seemingly innocuous robots we were expected to see as friendly and trustworthy additions to society.[3] What happens not *if*, but *when*, it suddenly goes rogue?

To make Spot appear more harmless, Boston Dynamics kicked their propaganda machine into high gear. No, Spot is *not* a highly trained autonomous killing machine. He's man's best friend. He's cute and joyful. He loves to dance, even at work. He's working the catwalk at Paris Fashion Week. He's showing off his signature moves with K-pop supergroup BTS.

In a further attempt to separate their image from doomsday scenarios, Boston Dynamics signed a pledge declaring «that we will not weaponize our advanced-mobility general-purpose robots or the software we develop that enables advanced robotics and we will not support others to do so.»[4] By «weaponize,» they mean only attaching or mounting weapons technology themselves or supporting others who do so. This pledge conveniently ignores that the company's early development was made possible due to U.S. military contracts and funding from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), or that they frequently sell Spot to U.S. police departments alongside other legged robots to allied militaries around the world.

Despite this, calls to abolish or defund the police and their militarized surveillance technologies have persisted in the wake of the George Floyd Rebellion that swept the globe during the fiery summer of 2020. If Spot was going to roam the streets, people were going to

do something about it. There has been an increased demand for these robots to be removed from everyday life and the public spaces it patrols including university campuses, parks, and neighborhoods, along with the collective desire and resourcing to find out how to do so by taking matters into their own hands.

People shared tips and tricks on social media and in ad-hoc manuals for ways you could remove its battery or shut down Spot if you encountered it in your neighborhood.[5] Public outcries lead the New York Police Department (NYPD) to get rid of their «Digidog» in 2021 as they were trialing its use in patrolling Black and Latinx working-class neighborhoods such as the Bronx, before then bringing it back in 2023.[6]

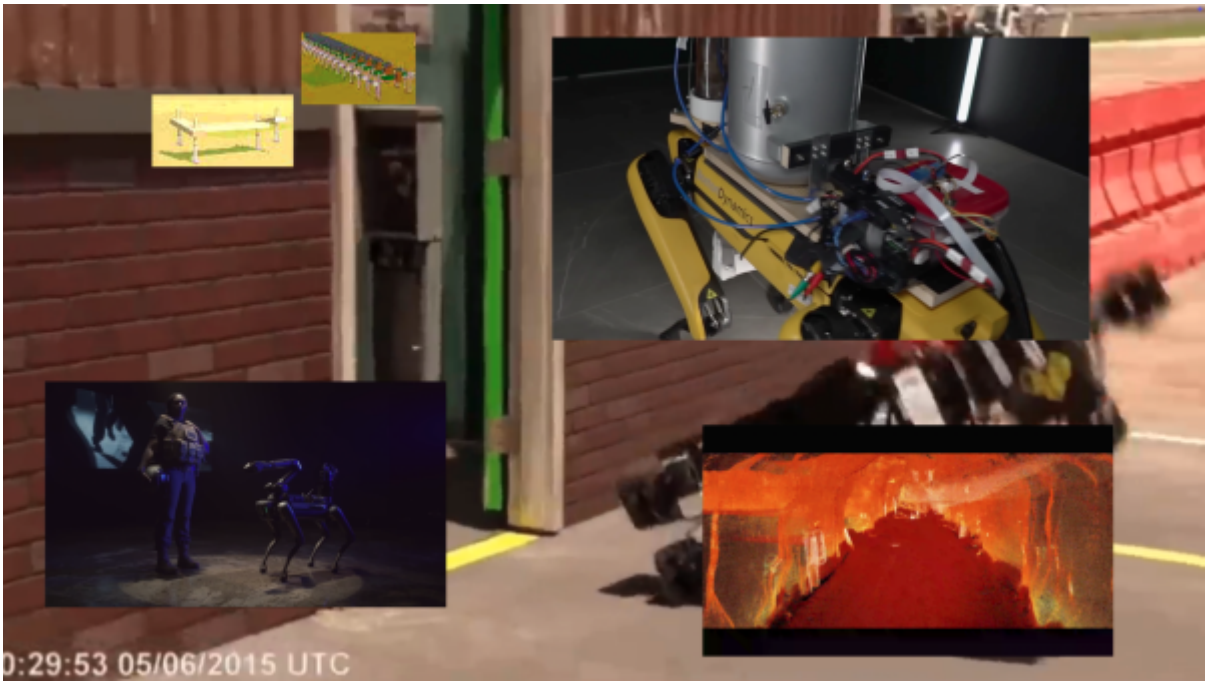
Of course a dog would replace *a dog*. Dogs have always been there to help get the job done,[7] from their uses on the battlefield to the plantation, in cases of civil disobedience, or by colonial dispossession through exploration on the Arctic frontier.[8]

As the origins of the police arise out of slave-catching units powered by dogs, invoking racialized terror becomes the dog's second nature – with its first being used as a tool to define humans by their nature (or whiteness).[9]

Part of the insidious nature of Spot is the mundane violence it embodies in its everyday existence. We become conditioned to accept its purpose; it's a K-9 officer there to serve and protect its community.

The creation of the tech justifies its use, as it is both a means and an end. Like the police. Or prisons. Or the border regimes it is trained to secure. Therefore Spot, just like these carceral institutions, cannot be reformed, only abolished. To sabotage Spot is to intervene in its usage.

To unbuild the prison is not a fantasy. It is an inevitability.[10]





«Risks are the transformation of potential hazards into actual harms. To estimate risks, it is necessary to combine a measure of:

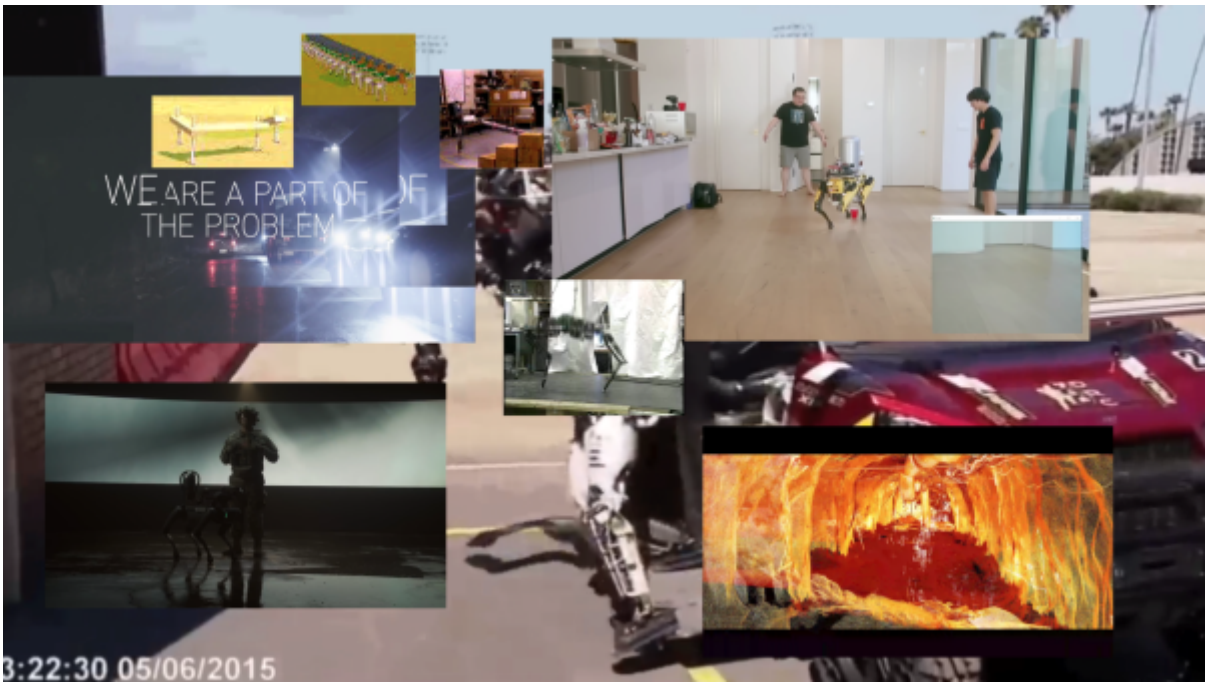
- The severity of the effect of hazards.

- The occurrence of hazards (how often, how likely, how predictably, how well-anticipated).»[11]

It is not a matter of how, but when. The capacities for sabotage are endless. The conditions are already there, what matters is how they're used as gaps in the perceptional system and create openings for possibility. Cushioning the distance between success and failure builds new capacity for collision.

The following is an incomplete set of speculative scenarios constructed by reappropriating the Boston Dynamics User Guide for Spot into a manual of sabotage. Remember, «the conditions of the environment are the main, if not the only, reason for instability and the possibility of failures during locomotion.»[12] So what are you waiting for? What do you risk by not shutting down Spot? By highlighting the technical, mechanical, and environmental weaknesses stated by the manufacturer, and how they could be exploited, this is a DIY guide of interventions that purposely require minimal to no technical knowledge.

Against the threat of harm actuated and unleashed in all domains of life, this choreography presents a form of abolitionist community self-defense for building a world without police (dogs).[13]



Spot should never come inside a household, but sometimes it can't help it. It loves to do the laundry. If you allow it in, Spot will do a very poor job. It cannot match your socks or iron your shirts, but it can give you a false sense of security. It makes the police-state feel cozier, like your most comfortable worn-in sweater that Spot picks up from the pile and hands to you. Here, take it. Spot knows it's your favorite.

Spot always knows how to make you smile. How to manage this uncanny balance between the affect of being harmless, cute, entertaining, and the seriousness that comes with performing highly technical tasks for more cost-efficient modes of working.

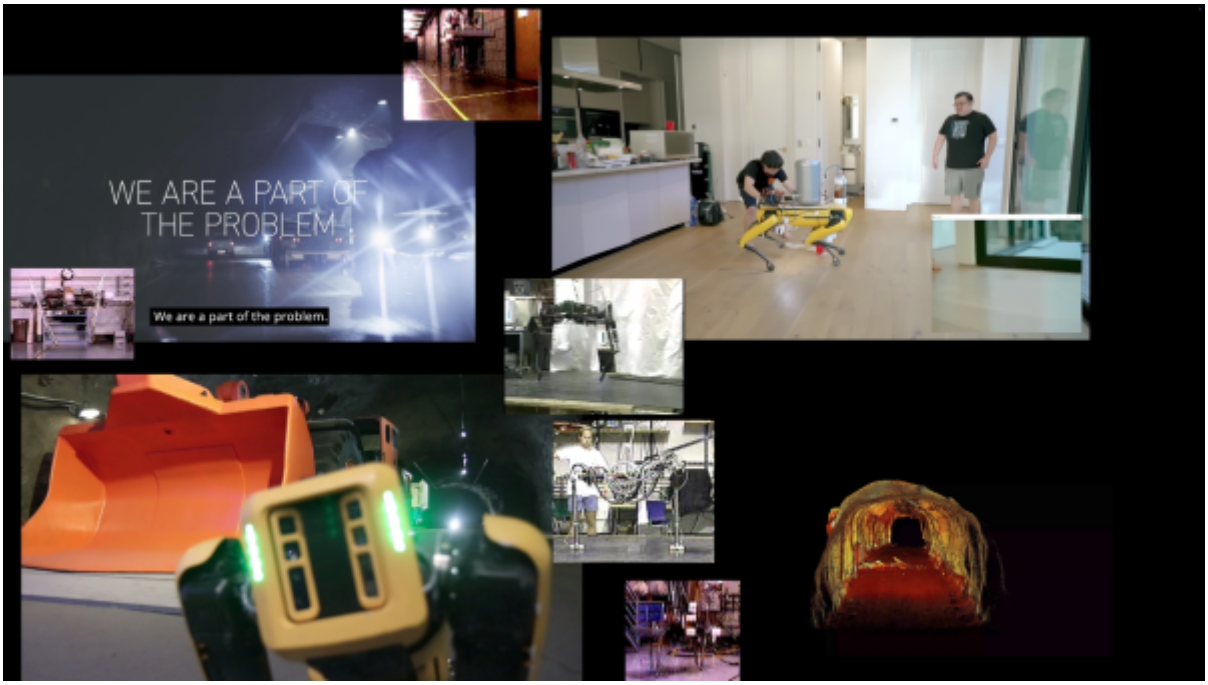
Still, as a lowly quadruped, it can be outpaced and outsmarted. It walks like a dog; it can walk over some objects. It can be programmed to play fetch. It can become anything you want it to.

Yet, Spot is still likely to make mistakes. It falls down a lot in complex environments, prone to accidental entrapment, or insufficient clearances. Its failures somehow make it more approachable rather than less trustworthy. It is difficult to understand where and how to locate the threat. Maybe you even feel sorry for Spot, with its cute clumsy movements.

But not bad enough to not kick it down the stairs if you were to encounter it, or maybe even push it into a busy street during one of its routine neighborhood patrols.

In these moments of crisis Spot shuts down, it plays dead. Even as its body keeps tumbling down several flights of stairs. Frozen when hitting the ground, sliding past your field of view.

The hazards of powerless motion.





Spot is an accumulation of damages.

You tell it this and its robotic arm sinks low to the ground and gives a sigh.

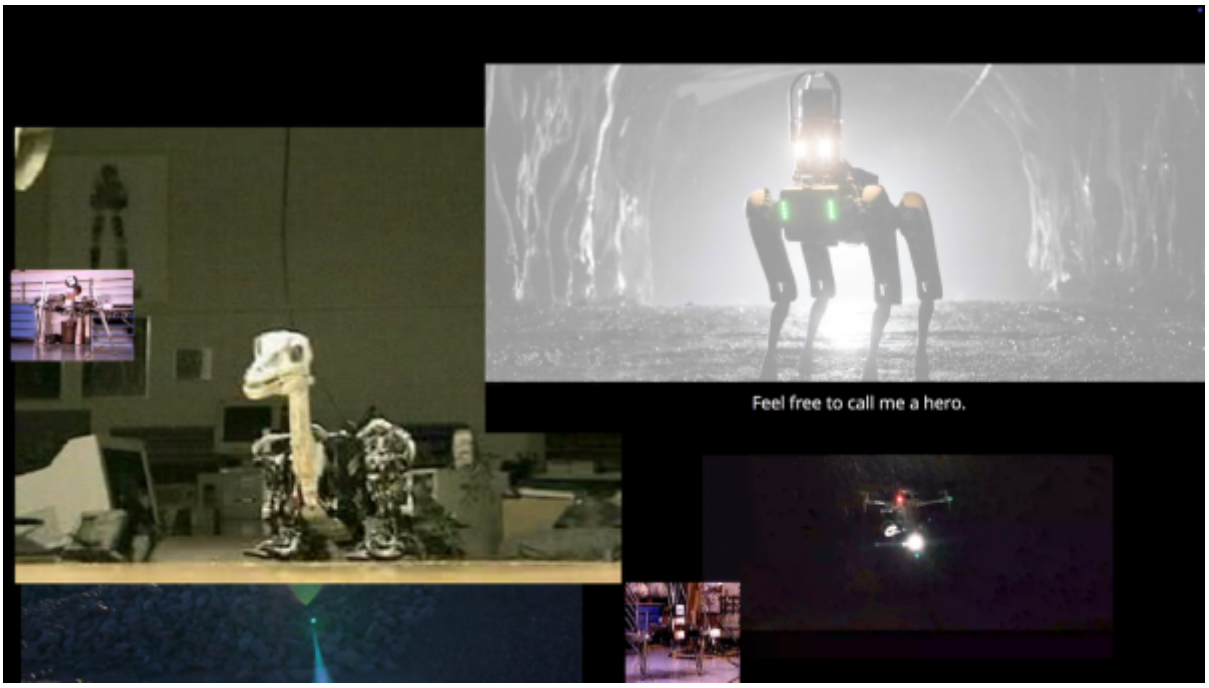
You say: Look, the evidence is clear:

You cannot get wet, especially when in the range of any physical contact with high voltage equipment. You can't be in proximity to equipment capable of powerful Radio Frequency emissions. You don't tolerate physical impact or the sudden appearance of new obstacles from blind spots in your path.

If anything happens to your battery, you're done. Destruction to the battery pack, anything that could cause the battery's electrolytes to catch fire through burning, puncturing, crushing, dropping, smashing, wrenching, through forcible tectonic injury. Not to mention the consequence of planetary damages.

Then there's interference with your docking station, either through destruction or removal. This could be done using water, spray foam, or other materials that could damage the electric port, or block access to the charging connection points.

Spot slowly backs away from you…



If you encounter Spot and it is unattended, yet you have none of the previously suggested implements or materials to interfere with its locomotion, and there are no stairs available, **do not** attempt to pick up Spot.

Instead, ask: *Would you like a frozen margarita?*

Spot tilts its head to the right and wags its robutt in approval when you say the word *mar-ga-rita*. When Spot leads you to find its Margaritaville® Frozen Drink Machine payload, look for AprilTag fiducials that meet the following requirements:

- AprilTags in the Tag36h11 set
- Default image size: 146 mm square
- Printed on white non-glossy U.S. letter-size sheets (preferably rigid)

You should find one near the docking station next to the empty dog bowl.

Take it and immediately destroy it. Draw a new one while thinking about what you wished still existed in your neighborhood or could one day. The meadow they plowed to make a parking lot. The community center demolished for luxury flats. The forest destroyed for a new police-training compound. Or the fires of the prison transformed into ashes, into gardens, into orchards, and then into the meadow once again.

Yet Spot doesn’t realize that failure is inevitable and a necessary part of daily rehearsal. The goal is not to optimize or innovate, to build a greener cage. To get overly focused on the successes made through short-term goals. It is only through failure that the world can be built again.

Spot will not realize that it is lost. It will need to be told. «To recover from a lost condition, the robot’s localization must be re-initialized. The robot will not attempt to recover from a lost condition on its own.»[14]

If Spot tries to re-initialize with the new fiducial, Spot will not be able to understand where it is. It will be wandering a grid without a map, coordination without coordinates. It will

continue this until its battery powers down. Hungry. Cold and alone.

You need to anticipate conditions of your own entrapment. How will you escape?
Will you twist the button? Hit the switch or pull the trigger?
Do you have what it takes? Can you operate under pressure?

Spot is not ready to be reconfigured in this way.

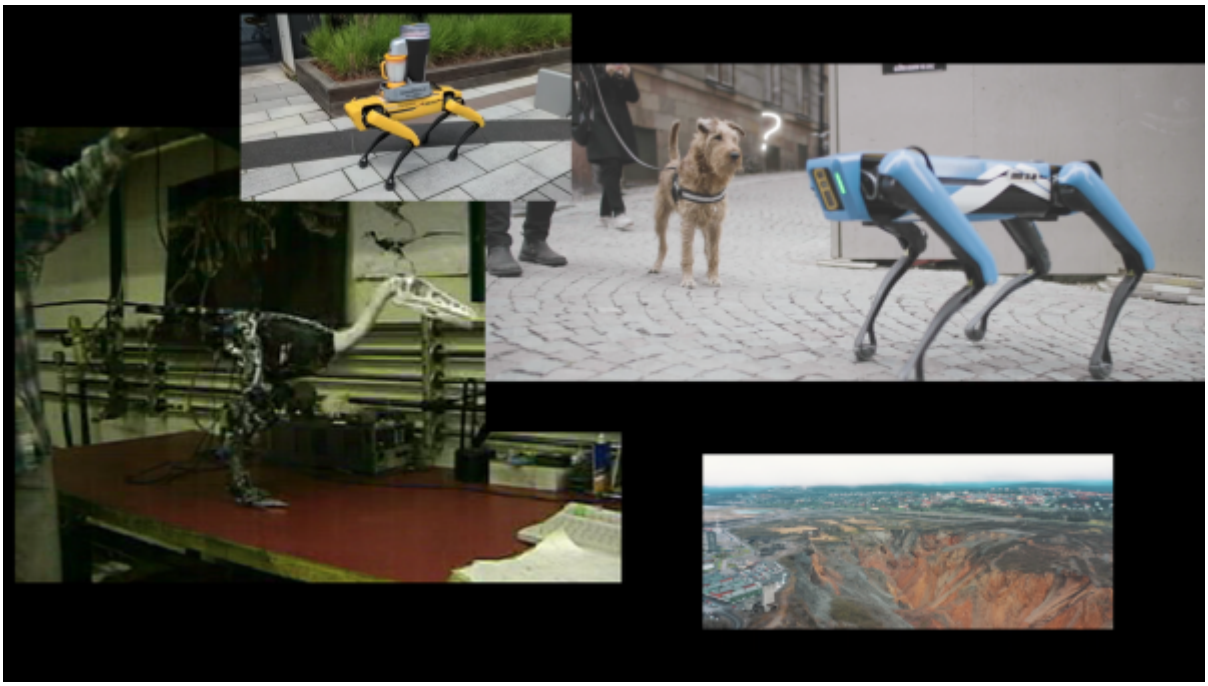
Motors de-energized. The legs become stiff to the touch, like a piece of furniture or a corpse. A convenient exposure lost in the command chain.

«Access to the Admin Console requires a user account. Default user-level and admin-level credentials are printed on a label in Spot's battery compartment. Boston Dynamics recommends you change these defaults as soon as possible.»[15]

You try to login with the default admin-level credentials and see that they haven’t been changed.

> «To log in to the Admin Console from the tablet controller:
> 1. Start with Spot powered on as described in Start Spot.
> 2. Connect the tablet controller as described in Pair the tablet controller with Spot.
> 3. Navigate to ? Menu > ADMIN CONSOLE.
> 4. Log in with the admin username and password printed on the label in Spot’s battery compartment, or using credentials provided by your system administrator.»[16]

Anticipating the loss of input, sit. Stay. Smart freeze.



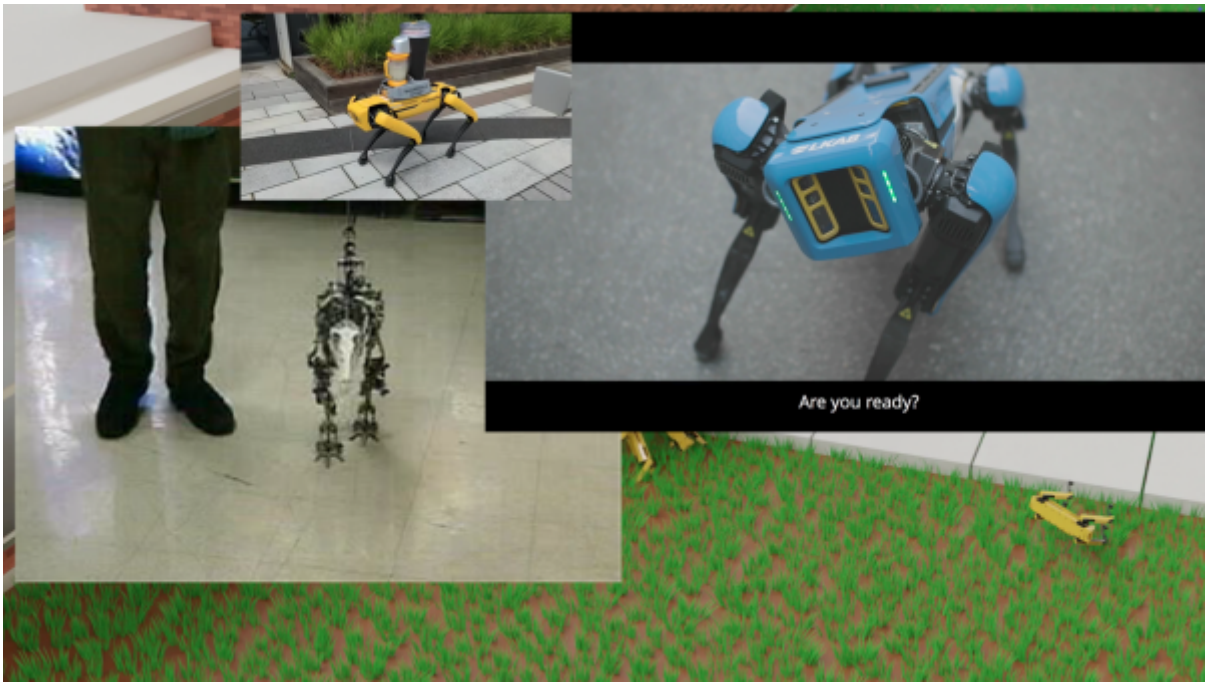
You wonder what this process of failure and collapse is like for Spot. You can see Spot starts to get paranoid and wonder how you would manage.

Areas illuminated by indicators so you can see what evades you. What waits to destroy you. Maybe it is a stairwell. Maybe it is a man with a gun or a bomb. A small obstacle or sometimes when the floor is too slippery. A collapsing railway tunnel, dark matte surfaces, or bright ambient light. Gravel and snow combined with black ice at an open-pit quartzite mine.

Falling steel beams on a construction site.

Ouch.

Roll over.

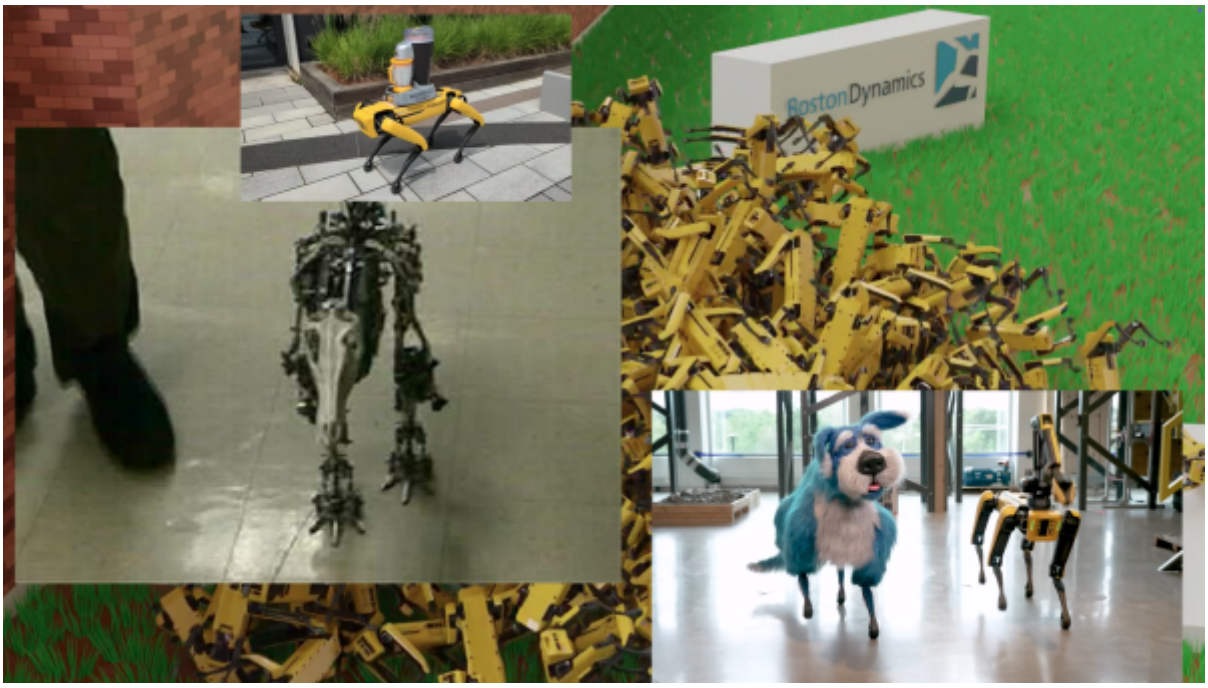




Spot walks into a recently blasted area in a minefield and scans the site after the masses have been transported out. It is operating autonomously and without network connection. Before Spot reaches the target waypoint to begin recording, you have created a series of deep traps into which it can fall that the 360-degree camera and SLAM lidar sensors cannot detect. Even with a Trimble X7 Scanner payload it is vulnerable to attack. You watch and wait.

Yet in this moment when Spot goes in the wrong direction and you are required to act, your body stops. Your palms sweat. You ask yourself, *who am I to do this work*? Whose hands are these in this joyful rebellion of errors? You look down and remember this is simple work, they're yours.

Despite its specially fitted snow booties equipped with crampons, Spot can be lassoed and dragged away into a snow drift, the nearby forest, off a cliff, into the open pit mine, or wherever your desires and the horizon of freedom takes you.



Cassandra Troyan, *Damage Archive: Visual Indexing for Choreographies of Resistance*, 2025, HD Video, 06:18, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW.
Found footage included from the MIT Leg Lab Video Archive, DARPA Archive, LKAB press videos, Boston Dynamics's YouTube page, Michael Reeves' «Teaching a Robot Dog to Pee Beer,» and Kinetic CGI's «Boston Dynamics Spot Mini robot dog pile.»
The video was part of a performative reading of «Spot® Instructions for Use – A Sabotage Manual» followed by a conversation with Jackie Wang for the launch of Imagination as a Site of Struggle journal issue on June 11th, 2025.

[1] The Leg Lab, housed in the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab was dedicated to studying legged locomotion and building dynamic legged robots. «Robots,» in: MIT Leg Laboratory http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/leglab/robots/robots.html.

[2] Boston Dynamics, *Spot Launch Video*, YouTube video, 3:21, September 24, 2019, https://youtu.be/aFuA50H9uek.

[3] Dom Galeon, «Dark Future: Here's When We'll Have the Autonomous Guard Dogs from Black Mirror,» in: *Futurism*, January 17, 2018, https://futurism.com/dark-future-autonomous-guard-dogs-black-mirror.

[4] Boston Dynamics, «General Purpose Robots Should Not Be Weaponized,» October 6, 2022, https://bostondynamics.com/news/general-purpose-robots-should-not-be-weaponized/.

[5] Sam Zengler, «How to Shut Down Boston Dynamics' Robot Dog Spot,» in: *Mashable*, October 12, 2021, https://mashable.com/article/how-to-shut-down-boston-dynamics-robot-

dog-spot.

[6] Mihir Zaveri, «N.Y.P.D. Robot Dog's Run Is Cut Short After Fierce Backlash,» *New York Times*, April 28, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/nyregion/nypd-robot-dog-backlash.html.

[7] «Spot Makes Tunnel Scanning Safer and More Efficient for Veidekke,» in: *BuildingPoint Scandinavia*, July 7, 2023, https://buildingpoint-scandinavia.com/blog/spot-makes-tunnel-scanning-safer-and-more-efficient-for-veidekke.

[8] M. R. Tahan, «Introduction: Dogs, the Arctic, and Amundsen's Clandestine Switch to the Antarctic,» in: *Roald Amundsen's Sled Dogs*, Cham: Springer, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02692-9_1.

[9] Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

[10] Helen V. Pritchard and Cassandra Troyan, «In the Mouth of a Polar Bear,» in: *The Anti-Menagerie*, 2021, https://theantimenagerie.net/2021_In_the_mouth_of_a_polar_bear/.

[11] Boston Dynamics, *Spot Instructions for Use, Version 2.2.0*, September 2024, p. 30.

[12] Ibid., p. 34.

[13] This work is hugely indebted to the many lineages of struggle against infrastructures of empire and the abolitionist world-building needed to make other forms of life possible, by thinking with, (but not limited to): Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Jackie Wang, Charmaine Chua, Nat Raha, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Robyn Maynard, Glen Coulthard, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Xander Dunlap, Peter Gelderloos, and the Infrastructural Rehearsals Collective. In terms of saboteurial poetics, Ida Björel's *Miximum Ca' Canny: The Sabotage Manuals: You Cutta Da Pay We Cutta Da Shob*. Translated by Jennifer Hayashida. Oakland: Commune Editions, 2016.

[14] Boston Dynamics, «Autonomy Technical Summary,» https://dev.bostondynamics.com/docs/concepts/ autonomy/graphnav_tech_summary.html.

[15] Boston Dynamics, *Spot Instructions for Use*, p. 62.

[16] Ibid.

CASSANDRA TROYAN

Cassandra Troyan is a writer, artist, organizer, and a PhD researcher at the University of Westminster (CAMRI) and the Critical Media Lab at the Basel Academy of Art and Design (FHNW). Their current research investigates community-led abolitionist imaginaries that arise out of situated or land-based struggles in resistance to the «so-called» green and digital transition, and the creative practices used to articulate them. Much of their work within recent years takes the form of co-creating spaces for collaborative processes or political interventions through abolitionist approaches and grounded methods.

This contribution is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0 International (Creative Commons, Attribution, Non Commercial, No Derivatives). Images and videos integrated into the contribution are not included in the CC BY-NC-ND License. For any use not permitted by legal copyright exceptions, authorization from the respective copyright holders is required.

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21905054