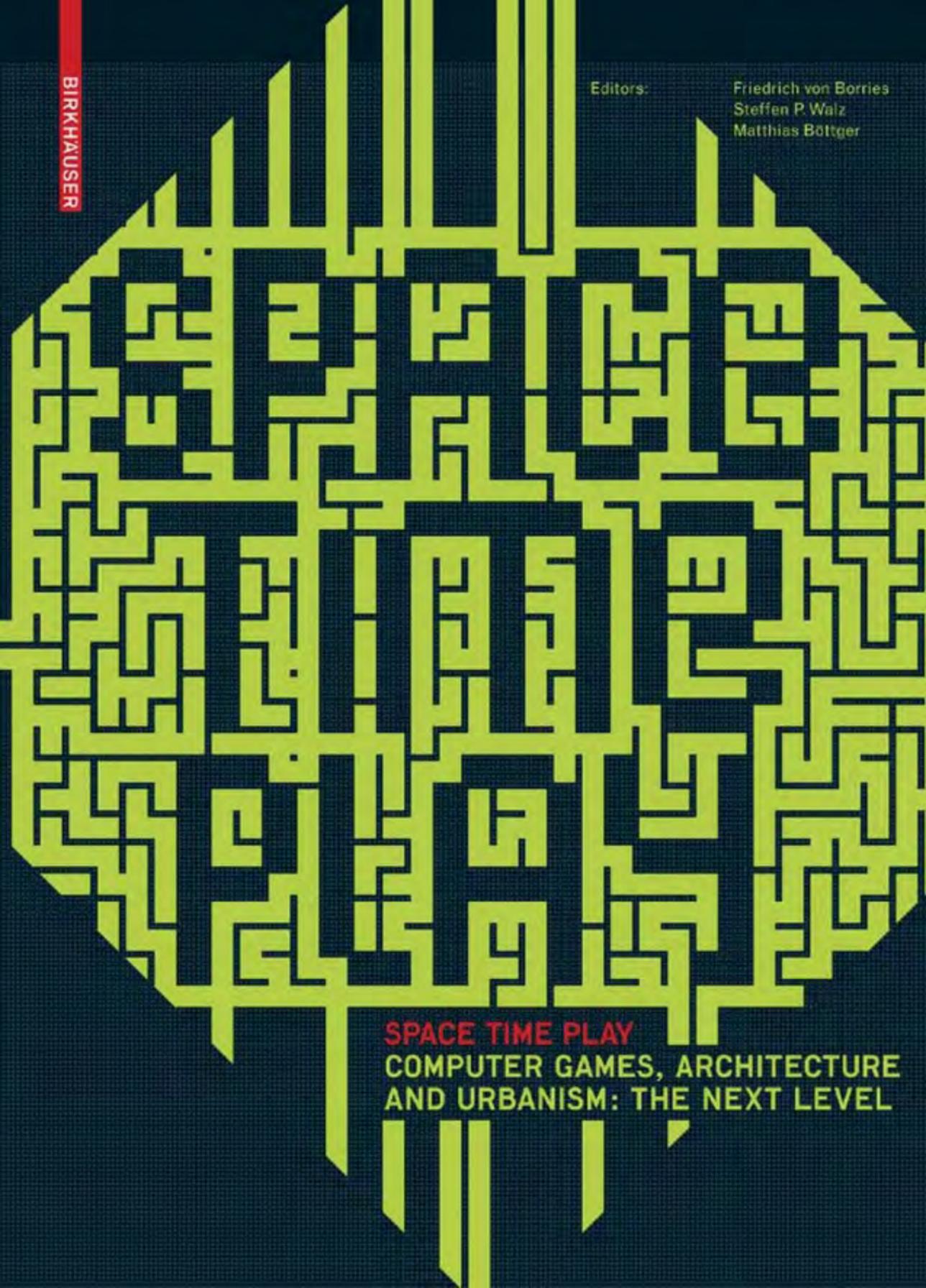


BIRKHAUSER

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SPACE TIME PLAY
COMPUTER GAMES, ARCHITECTURE
AND URBANISM: THE NEXT LEVEL

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FORBIDDEN GAMES

The first computer games were developed for research purposes – to prove scientific ideas, not to provide pleasure. In 1947, the first computer game was created in the United States. In it, several knobs were used to adjust the speed and direction of a missile represented by a dot as it flew toward a target. Five years later, in 1952, a Ph.D. student at Cambridge University developed the tic-tac-toe (noughts and crosses) game *OXO* to illustrate his thesis about human–computer interaction. This situation continued for over a decade: scientists created games for super computers in research labs. In the 1970s, progress was made in miniaturization of computer chips and the development of personal computers, which enabled the creation of games on platforms accessible to the public. The two routes down which the market went afterwards were that of the home consoles connected to television sets and that of the arcades where people went to play games.

Now the video game industry is one of the leading entertainment industries in the world. This is made manifest by its growing exposure to larger audiences, which, in turn, yields substantial financial increases; the industry's revenues for 2005 reached 31 billion US Dollars, second only to the Hollywood film industry's, whose income in that year stood at some 44 billion US Dollars. In other words, video games are a highly significant factor in the western entertainment industry.

The industry produces Alternative Reality Games, community games and strategy games, of which the most predominant subcategory is the war games genre. The realistic war game, which has always been popular, has gained momentum in recent years concurrent with the media's increased use of terms such as "the axis of evil" and "the war on terror." The global war against terrorism has led to an intensification of nationalistic and patriotic feelings among gamers, and gaming companies have identified the potential and hurried to issue ideological fighting settings. Western gaming companies develop countless realistic war games with a clear-cut division between "good" and "evil." The American/European/Israeli hero will usually belong to some security force sent to thwart the sinister missions of the forces of evil threatening the free world.

In his 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance lecture, playwright Harold Pinter included a short, mock speech for George W. Bush, encapsulating the dichotomous worldview held by the US today: "God is good. God is great. God is good. My God is good. Bin Laden's God is bad. His is a bad God. Saddam's God was bad, except he didn't have one. He was a barbarian. We are not barbarians. We don't chop people's heads off. We believe in freedom. So does God. I am not a barbarian. I am the democratically elected leader of a freedom-loving democracy. We are a compassionate society.

We give compassionate electrocution and compassionate lethal injection. We are a great nation. I am not a dictator. He is. I am not a barbarian. He is. And he is. They all are. I possess moral authority. You see this fist? This is my moral authority. And don't you forget it" (Pinter 2005).

The worldview promoted by "the war on terror," simplistically crafted by President Bush after 9/11 in his "You are either with us or with the terrorists" formulation, sweepingly divides the world into good and evil without middle tones. The map of the world is divided into "friend" areas, which should be strengthened, and "enemy" zones, which should be conquered. The rules are clear and so is the mission, just as in war games. At times, it seems as though the excessive use of digital simulators for training and various war games has totally distorted our ability to read and analyze reality. Objectors to the current US policy strive to reveal the oversimplicity of the dichotomous view and the blindness it spawns, thereby exposing it as bankrupt and unfit to confront global terror. The continuous failures in Afghanistan, Iraq and, as of the writing of these lines, Lebanon only reinforce the feeling that there is room for a different way of thinking and a more intricate worldview.

In the "Forbidden Games" exhibition, we try to provoke discussions and debates amongst our visitors about harsh Middle Eastern geopolitical issues. Unlike at standard game exhibitions, visitors will not find the most advanced products in the field. Many of the games scattered among the rooms are activists' productions created with modest resources by avid players and independent programmers. The common thread is a connection to war and the contemporary political situation in the Middle East, from Syria to Lebanon and Israel.

Forbidden Games features more than 22 video games written and distributed independently of the entertainment industry by activist media, academies, ideological groups and companies as tools for addressing political and social issues. The alternative gaming they introduce is embodied in their political and ideological content, but also in their implicit suggestion of a reconsideration of the potentials inherent in the game medium, the language used therein and the open code. In each case, the final result is a single package that combines its creator's values with hours of pleasure and suspense. The games, which all present narratives antithetical to those presented today in the western media, are divided in the exhibition space according to how they do so: some are Web games centered on swift "gut responses" to topical issues such as the Lebanon war, the Gulf war, etc., others are games by activists criticizing the ideology currently dominating global politics, and yet others are performance games that require participation of the gamer's entire body. Media identities and images designed to foster the "war on terror" and the polar worldview it creates are part and parcel of the "war" itself. When you live in the Middle East, you cannot avoid the image ascribed to you by western media. The conceivers of video and computer games in Arab countries try to reinstate themselves with the responsibility of creating their own image, which, to their mind, has been distorted by the western media. They strive to recount the story behind the conflict with Israel and guide the youth playing computer games in constituting their knowledge of the world. A good example of this is the game *UnderSiege* (2005) developed by the Syrian company, Afkar Media. The game is based on the modern

history of Palestine. It focuses on the life of a Palestinian family between 1999 and 2002, during the Second Intifada. It contains graphic violence and shooting at soldiers, but not at civilians. Its action is inspired by real stories of Palestinian society as documented by the United Nations (1978-2004). According to the UN, the West Bank and Gaza Strip constitute occupied land, and thus military actions there performed by local fighters against occupying forces are considered legitimate.

Another game that tries to deal with regional history is *Global Conflicts* (2007). The gamer plays a young journalist who has just arrived in Israel, where he tries to shape the region's future through peaceful means. The player must complete his assignment at all costs, navigating between Palestinian and Israeli sources of information to complete his article. Will the player be able to remain objective and gain the trust of both sides as the conflict escalates? What happens when people around him become more than mere sources? The game enables the player to learn about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is informed by real personal stories that present the conflict from different perspectives.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the game *Special Force* (2005), created by Hezbollah supporters in 2005. *Special Force* does not leave players much time to think about the point of view of the "other": the moment a mission starts, the player must find the Israeli snipers shooting at him and neutralize them with hand grenades. The game, which looks like a regular action game, was built on the *Genesis 3D* (1998) open source platform. Its introduction sequence shows the explosion of an Israeli tank. While the computer loads a series of drills – among them, shooting at Ariel Sharon's forehead, an action that grants the player ten points – a flurry around the burning of the Israeli flag is presented.

There are two games in the exhibition that try to deal with the First and Second Intifadas, each developed for a different end. *Intifada* (1989) – one of the few reality games produced in Israel – was created during the First Intifada in 1989 by Mike Medved. It attempts to simulate the relationship between the behavior of a single Israeli soldier faced with Palestinian demonstrators and the government's policies. The goal of the game is to scatter the demonstrators while killing and injuring as few of them as possible; this is achieved by using wooden clubs, rubber bullets, tear gas and other scattering devices. The political picture evolves throughout the course of the game: the Israeli Minister of Defense is replaced, and the government policy towards the demonstrations changes – as does the soldier's ability to react. The soldier in this game is a reflection of a given Israeli worldview; he is portrayed as a single soldier facing a charging crowd, a human and moral individual attempting to avoid unnecessary carnage, while his enemies are portrayed as bloodthirsty terrorists. The Israelis, according to this worldview, are always the few fighting the many, David facing Goliath.

The second game dealing with the Intifada is *Stone Throwers* (2005), developed by Syrian Mohammad Hamza as a manifestation of support for the Palestinian people. This game was created after the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada. Nevertheless, it underscores the Palestinian perception of the resistance to the Israeli occupation, according to which the Intifada remains a popular uprising based on stone throwing, rather than a form of armed resistance. This game is centered upon a single

Palestinian who must throw stones at the Israeli policemen approaching him on both sides in order to protect the al-Aqsa mosque. Like the Israeli *Intifada* game, this game was designed to strengthen the perception of resistance as predicated upon the heroic struggle of an individual faced with numerous policemen. The individual portrayed here is waging a “pure” battle with no live ammunition, and he will win independence and honor through self-sacrifice.

The game *September 12* (2005), developed by newsgaming.com, focuses on the wider conflict between East and West and presents the wounding of innocent people in “the war on terror” as a dangerous consequence of fighting: air raids kill civilians and destroy houses, which leads to radicalization and thus an increase in the number of terrorists. Players must try to send “sophisticated bombs” and strike terrorists walking amidst civilians. But the bombs inevitably strike civilians as well, and other civilians consequently gather to mourn the innocent victims; some of them, in turn, then become terrorists. In other words, the player of *September 12* can never win. A localized success ensures the failure of the entire mission. The war against terror generates terror. After several bombings, the player inevitably starts to examine notions that have become highly prevalent in the media and the military discourse, such as “targeted killing,” “surgical operation,” “target bank,” “sterile area,” etc.

♦ *Genesis 3D* (1998), real-time 3D engine developed by Eclipse Entertainment. ♦ *Global Conflicts* (2007), developed and published by Serious Games Interactive. ♦ Pinter, H. (2005), *Nobel Lecture – Art, Truth & Politics*, Retrieved from http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html ♦ *September 12* (2005), developed by newsgaming.com. ♦ *Special Force* (2005), developed and published by Islamic Organization Hezbollah. ♦ *Stone Throwers* (2005), developed by Mohammad Hamza. ♦ *UnderSiege* (2005), developed by Afkar Media, published by Dar al-Fikr.

Global Conflicts: Palestine: <http://www.seriousgames.dk/gc.html>
September 12: <http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>
Special Force: <http://download.specialforce.net/english/indexeng.htm>
The Stone Throwers: <http://www.damascus-online.com/stonethrowers/>
UnderSiege: www.afkarmedia.com
Gulf War 2: <http://www.idleworm.com/nws/2002/11/iraq2.shtml>
Intifada: <http://www.old-games.org/game.php?game=intifada>
Kuma/War: <http://www.kumawar.com/>
The Night Bush Was Captured: <http://hotair.com/archives/2006/09/15/video-game-night-of-bush-capturing/contains>
Suicide Bomber Game: <http://newgrounds.com/portal/view/50525>
Several “Nasrallah games”: <http://www.planetnana.co.il/atarsh/flashoo/nasral.html>
<http://www.amirlotan.com/nassralla/nasralla.html>
<http://www.tapuz.co.il/North/Game.asp>
Terror: [http://www.servus.at/cubic/\(t\)error.htm](http://www.servus.at/cubic/(t)error.htm)
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The War on Terror: <http://war-against-terror.info>
Wild West Bank: <http://www.brand.co.il/unik/westbank>