

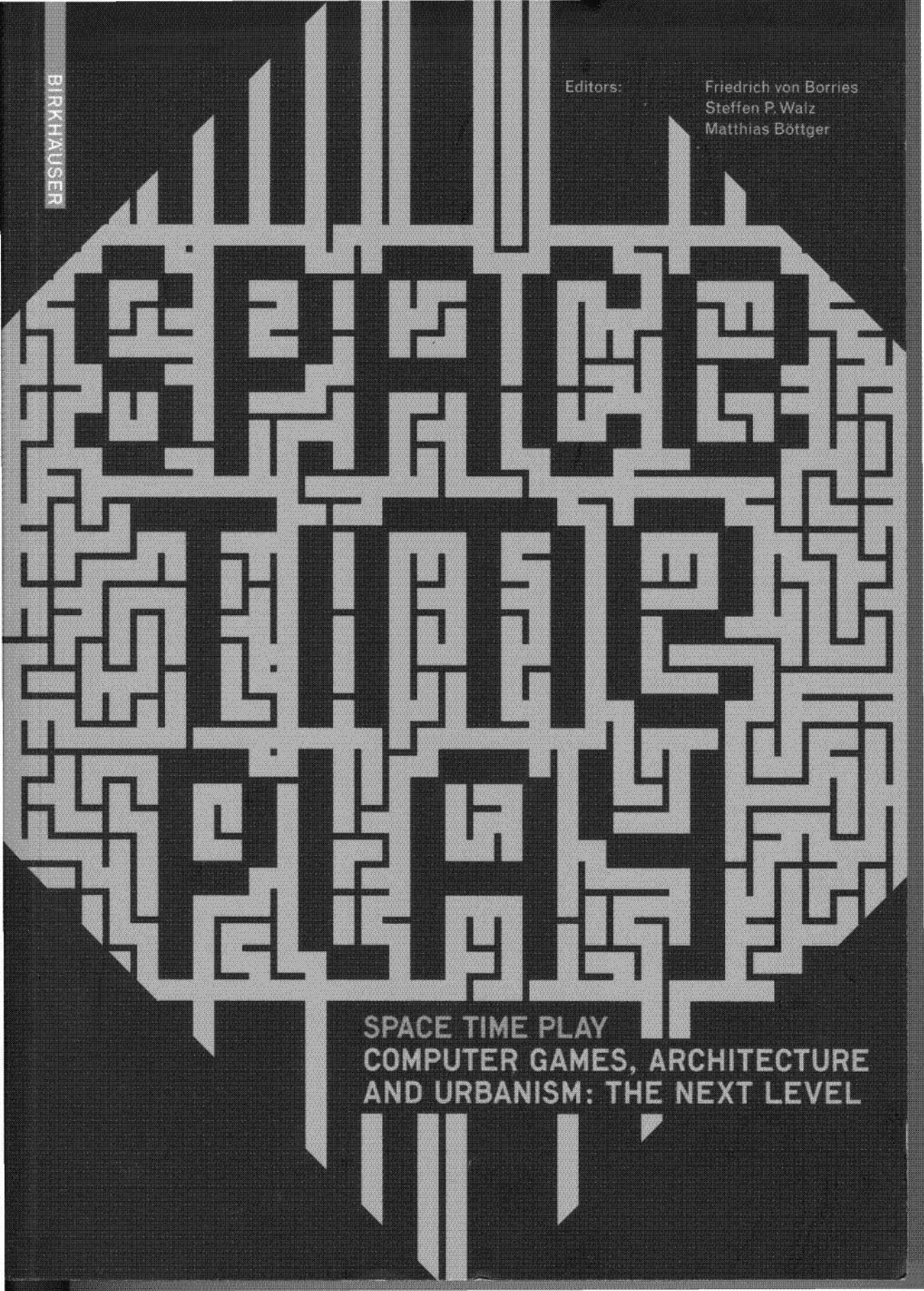
BIRKHAÜSER

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

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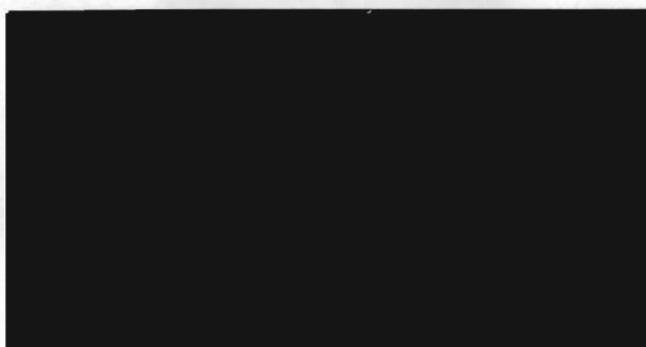
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eXistenZ

From Fiction to Reality



The increasing popularity of mobile devices equipped with location awareness contributes to the design of new types of games: pervasive games. Pervasive games broaden the traditional game environment.

Not only are they played beyond a board or computer screen, but they can also access the player unexpectedly, thereby eliminating a specifically delineated gameplay. The game environment never stops running. If in traditional Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) disconnecting from the Internet means leaving the game, how can one disconnect from a pervasive game given that its gamespace coincides with the space in which one lives?

In his 1999 movie *eXistenZ*, director David Cronenberg explored this lack of distinction between playful and nonplayful spaces. In the film, game designer Allegra Geller tests her new game *eXistenZ* with a focus group. She presents it as "not just a new game, but an entirely new game system." Apparently a virtual reality game, *eXistenZ* is intriguing because it merges physical and virtual spaces in a completely unexpected way – *eXistenZ* does not reveal what reality is.

Like *The Matrix* (Warner Bros. et al. 1999) and *The Thirteenth Floor* (Centropolis Film 1999), *eXistenZ* explores the idea of placing virtual spaces inside the user's mind by means of physical connections. But in the former, it was almost always clear what was reality and what was simulation. *eXistenZ*, on the other hand, makes no distinction between

the two. In the beginning, it is apparently clear that users are playing a virtual reality game, having been invited to do so by the game's designer. Once players get into the virtual environment, however, they are faced with layers of games within the game, which make them move forward and backward inside *eXistenZ* and thereby completely merge reality and imagination. Until the last scenes of the movie, viewers are still fairly sure about the distinction between reality and gamespace despite having to keep track of the many games contained within *eXistenZ*. But then the players emerge on to one more level, which reveals another possible reality; that which had seemed to be real turns out to be yet another layer of the game. Again, viewers are supposed to think that they are finally in contact with the "real reality," but even at the movie's end, one character asks: "But tell me, are we still in the game?"

eXistenZ merges the physical and the virtual precisely because it does not distinguish between them. Reality can be playable, and a game can be more than mere imagination. All possible worlds might be different realities enfolded within one another yet all contained within "the real." At one point, a gas station worker says that he works at the gas station "only in the most pathetic level of reality," thereby pointing out that the game environment could be more real than reality itself, constituting a possible simulacra. And indeed, Cronenberg's movie is not about virtual reality as such. *eXistenZ* presents several levels of reality that are overlaid one on top of the other. These different levels can be perceived as virtualities that are no longer ready to emerge into our "real" world, but rather are already here.

If movies like *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor* are related to the future of traditional video (virtual reality) games, *eXistenZ* is definitely more concerned with the emerging field of pervasive and hybrid reality games, in which virtual and physical spaces merge to create a new concept of playable space: hybrid space.

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