



The *Homo Ludens* exhibition analyses the phenomenon of video games as an industry, a medium of communication and an art expression in today's society

## Life and videogames merge at CaixaForum Barcelona

- The *Homo Ludens. Video games to understand the present* exhibition, curated by Luca Carrubba and designed by the Domestic Data Streamers studio, presents an anthropological look at video games, a cultural, aesthetic and artistic phenomenon essential in contemporary mass culture.
- The display analyses video games as an industry, cultural medium and creative proposal, based on specific examples of video games and contemporary artworks. It includes works by such artists as Bill Viola, Daniel Canogar and Mónica Rikić and offers an interactive, innovative journey in which the spectator takes centre stage in a gamified, participatory experience.
- The thesis of the exhibition confirms the existence of a world in which life and play are increasingly intertwined. In fact, without realising it we now play when we travel, learn or even fall in love.
- The exhibition brings together 58 pieces by 36 creators, consisting in video games, photographs, sculptures, videos and installations, and will remain open until 18 April 2022.

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***Homo Ludens. Video games to understand the present.*** Dates: From 2 December 2021 at 4 p.m. to 18 April 2022. **Organisation and production:** "la Caixa" Foundation. **Curator:** Luca Carrubba, director of ArsGames. **Place:** CaixaForum Madrid (Paseo del Prado, 36).

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**Barcelona, 1 December 2021.** The deputy general director of "la Caixa" Foundation, **Elisa Durán**, the director of CaixaForum Barcelona, **Lluís Noguera**, and the curator **Luca Carrubba** have today presented in CaixaForum Barcelona the exhibition entitled *Homo Ludens. Video games to understand the present, a reflection on the central role of play in our culture, based on the phenomenon of video games*. Produced and organised by "la Caixa" Foundation, the display features 58 pieces by 36 creators consisting in video games and artworks and offers a plural, critical vision of video games, which are analysed not only as an industrial product but also as a cultural, aesthetic and artistic phenomenon. The exhibition is curated by **Luca Carrubba**, director of the ArsGames association, a group focussing on video-game research and cultural dissemination, with a studio, **Domestic Data Streamers**, engaged in exhibition design and the interactive experience.

It is calculated that more than 2,500 million people worldwide are video-game enthusiasts. The exhibition route analyses how video games are present in many areas of our society, and addresses the role of **play as a practice that has regulated human activity** throughout history. Rather than a chronological record of video games, the display offers a sociological vision that brings culture and technology together with industry and art. Its content includes video games and works of contemporary art by such artists as **Bill Viola**, **Daniel Canogar**, **Hamilton Mestizo**, **Matteo Bittanti**, **Mónica Rikić** and **Robert Yang**, among others. Subjects addressed in the show encompass universal game mechanics, the multi-million-dollar industry of video games and their influence on other disciplines such as art and science, and identity in a world where the real coexists with the virtual.

The exhibition offers an **interactive and participatory journey** in which spectators act as gamers, though without ever playing any of the featured video games. Like in a game, they choose the route they prefer to take starting out from a central plaza which serves as the antechamber and distributor space of the display. On starting, each visitor is given a device –the **Coin**– with which they can answer a series of questions put to them along the journey. Using their replies, the system will create an avatar which will identify them with a gamer profile: from the sceptical to the most ardent devotee of video games. A community of avatars will be projected on the giant screen installed in the last hall of the exhibition who will represent the accumulated profiles of all visitors to the display in real time.



Thus the exhibition brings a new perspective to the player concept – fleeing from the gamer stereotype – and shows a “videoludified” world where life and play melt together and in which we are all, whether we believe it or not, gamers.

The display forms part of "la Caixa" Foundation's commitment to a line of exhibition programming around **artistic manifestations of contemporaneity, digitisation and the present and future of technologies at the service of art, humanism and society**. In this context, currently taking place at CaixaForum Barcelona to great public acclaim is an exhibition by the **teamLab** international art collective, the fathers of immersive technology, featuring two large installations that invite collective co-creation with an innovative format. At the same centre, visitors can access the **Symphony** experience which, guided by Gustavo Dudamel and using virtual reality technology, invites the public to enter an orchestra and the very heart of classical music. The **Homo Ludens** exhibition, premiered in Madrid will subsequently embark on a long **tour until 2025** which, after Barcelona will take it to Seville, Valencia, Palma, Tarragona, Zaragoza, Lleida and Girona.

### **Layout of the exhibition**

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The exhibition begins in a hall that welcomes visitors and where they will see a wall of screens showing people of all ages facing them and playing video games. At a counter, they are given the **Coin**, which will enable them to interact with the exhibition. A first set of questions and answers helps them learn how the interaction system operates and gathers the information necessary to profile them and understand the relationship they have – or think they have – with video games.

They then proceed to the **central lobby**, a well-lit space from which **visitors can access five halls, each addressing a different theme**. At the entrance and exit of these halls they will respond to some of the dilemmas posed by the video games. This central plaza of the exhibition is conceived as a distributor which enables visitors not only to see, but also to live the experience as if it were a video game.



## Harvest, war, configuration, skill and simulation

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The first area of the exhibition is introduced in this hall – ***We’ve always played*** – with explanations of five of the main universal game mechanics, which simulate human activities: **harvest, war, configuration, skill** and **simulation**. Traditional games are featured here (Puzzles, Marbles, Chess, Dolls’ House and Mancala) alongside well-known retro video games (Tetris, Street Fighter, X-Com, The Sims and Pac-Man).

The ***We play with money*** hall analyses the capability the video-game industry has had to generate a massive audience – with 2,500 million people, a third of the world’s population – and a stable economic model. A space is included in this area that addresses what we see in video games and examines those that have expanded the number of enthusiasts of the genre exponentially, such as free-to-play games and the phenomenon of e-sports. The next space talks about the dark side of the industry, that which is not so visible, with works that address aspects like exploitative work practices, programmed obsolescence policies and addictions. By way of illustration, this area shows pieces by **Hamilton Mestizo** and **Matteo Bittanti** and screens the documentary ***Gold Farmers*** by **Ge Jin**, which reveals the working conditions in an ignored sector of the video-game industry that blurs the boundaries between play and work, consumption and production, and the virtual and the real world.

The ***We play creating*** space looks at video games as a tool for progress and explores their potential as a medium of artistic, social and scientific creation. It explains how video games reframe artistic practices in what is known as *game art*, and how they have influenced video art, driven collaborative urban design experiments and established examples of human computation applied to science. The space shows video games as a medium for contemporary works of art, such as the video art works *Don Federico* and *Sola*, by **Agustina Isidori**, the interactive audiovisual sculpture *The machine that plays alone*, by **Mónica Rikić**, and *Game Over*, by **Daniel Canogar**. It also analyses models of human computing with examples of how video games are increasingly employed in seeking treatments for diseases like cancer, Alzheimer’s and even COVID-19. Video-game mechanics have also been used in collaborative urban design, examples of which may be found in the use of **Cities: Skylines** in the urban development of the Royal Seaport district of Stockholm; the *Block by Block* project by the United Nations agency UN-Habitat, which was applied to improve urban spaces in different social contexts; and the **Craftea** programme, by ArsGames, which involves children in proposals to enhance the public space.



The space entitled ***We play with identity*** analyses how online life influences us at the individual and collective level, both on- and off-screen. The digital world lets us bring life to alternative or idealised versions of ourself and becomes an environment where we can establish new social relations and connect with social and political movements. ***RuneScape***, for example, one of the longest-running massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, offers the possibility to take part in an annual virtual parade to transform its fantastical world into a scenario that joins in the worldwide celebration of LGBTIQ+ Pride Day. And **Black Lives Matter** activists have created a mod(ification) for the ***Fallout 4*** video game that enables players to adorn their avatar with T-shirts and slogans of that movement.

The ***We play with the margins*** space exhibits projects that break the traditional rules of video games and offer alternatives to the established model of the genre. For instance, ***The Night Journey***, created by the renowned video artist **Bill Viola**, tells the story of an individual's journey towards enlightenment in a deliberately slow venture; and ***The Tearoom***, by **Robert Yang**, allows players to relive the repression of the gay community from the perspective of a young man in search of casual relationships while trying to avoid the police.

### **We all play**

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The ***We play without realising it*** hall reveals how video games are present in many aspects of our everyday life, and so it could be said that one way or another everybody plays. In language, the aesthetics and mechanics of video games are present in areas traditionally distant from gaming. Apps, for example, use methods of gamification (or "ludification"). This hall features ***Gaming Life***, an interactive experience created by Luca Carrubba and Domestic Data Streamers, and the documentary *Game Worlds: The videoludification of reality*, made with direct advice from the sociologist and video-game specialist Daniel Muriel.

Finally, in the **Final screen**, visitors encounter an open space with a huge projection screen they can interact with. At last, after having answered the questions posed in the different halls, they get to know their avatar and discover what gamer profile they have in this videoludified world.

The screening not only reveals each visitor's individual profile, but also shows a community of avatars that represent, in real time, the accumulated profiles of all the visitors to the exhibition.



### Innovative activities: from a role journey to the mystery of a missing piece

In parallel to the exhibition, CaixaForum presents an extensive programme of activities entitled **PLAY; COMMUNITY; IDENTITY** straddling the physical and the virtual, coordinated by the video-game expert and critic **Borja Vaz**. As a novelty, these activities will opt for **new formats**, such as a **Game Jam**, a one-day hackathon that will invite participants to create video games in a collaboration with **Sony Interactive Entertainment** which, through its **PlayStation Talents** programme, has developed numerous activities of this nature in similar cultural contexts.

The activities will also include **role-playing games**, as well as **workshops** to bring the professional world of video-game development closer to the CaixaForum public. These thematic workshops will give visitors the opportunity to learn first-hand about the experience of speakers from the industry and the nature of their creative process, and to receive advice on how to approach video-game production. There will also be a **session with influencers** aimed at establishing a dialogue on what it’s like to be a content creator in Spain from a broad range of perspectives. In addition, **Jon Uriarte** and **Roc Herms**, reference points in the sector, will lead a **session on avatars** and the **phenomenon of digital identities** in virtual environments and the world of video games. And in conclusion, an activity will be held that will invite those present to cross the boundaries between the physical and virtual worlds to **reveal a mystery**: that of a piece lost in strange circumstances in the centre.

## **EXHIBITION TEXTS**

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### **Introduction**

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Play is a constant activity in life. In *Homo Ludens*, an essential work for the study of “the ludic”, the Dutch anthropologist Johan Huizinga reminds us that the ludic dimension is fundamental in understanding processes of worldmaking and socialisation, since it is with us from our earliest learnings.

Video games are the most contemporary representation of this dimension and a multifaceted type of product, both complex and popular at the same time. This exhibition explores the multiple territories in which the video game has



intervened and those which it has driven, establishing links with disciplines and areas of knowledge that, at first sight, are distanced.

To do this, the display offers a new perspective on the gamer concept. It shows a videoludified world in which life and play converge more and more every day and in which all of us who live there are, one way or another, players.

The works and games that comprise the exhibition transcend the strict boundaries of the act of playing and expose the phenomenon as an industry, cultural medium and creative proposal through which it is possible to understand our present.

## **Lobby**

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### **We’ve always played**

Since their origins, games have offered us dramatic models of the fundamental activities of humankind, such as sowing and harvesting, war and construction. All games employ universal mechanics which are inspired in these activities and provide ways of playing that have been present in all human civilisations.

Looking at their anthropological roots, the first digital games can be seen as a transposition to the new medium of these mechanics. Placed in dialogue with a collection of traditional toys, video games clearly show their continuity with the ludic tradition of the past.

### **We play with money**

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#### **The visible side**

The international video-game market exceeds the turnover of the film and music industries combined, which gives us a clear idea of its relevance as an economic engine. Among its recent phenomena, e-sports represent the most structured expression of a sector in continuous growth that blurs boundaries established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the separation of work and play, or between athlete and spectator.

In a process of constant technological innovation, video games demonstrate the capacity to generate a product of mass consumption in a global market. This is the visible side of an industry that offers a spectacle capable of attracting, managing and retaining the attention of millions of player around the world.



## **The dark side**

There are some dubious aspects in the way the video-game industry produces and governs the creative processes that give life to its products. Among the underlying economic mechanisms of its operation can be found particularly addictive formulae co-opted from games of chance and gambling, as well as exploitative work practices and programmed obsolescence policies. The result is a complex tangle of immaterial work and global industrial production that reveals the dark side of the industry.

## **We play creating**

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Video games have become powerful instruments of creation, research and design. We are currently witnessing an explosion of emergent uses of gaming that are flooding broad fields of human knowledge. The ludic is diversifying to operate as a strategy of creation in unexpected areas.

This is leading to a rethink of artistic practices, such as video art, in addition to fostering collaborative urban design experiments or establishing methods to apply human computation to science. The 21<sup>st</sup> century video game is the leading actor in a renewed scenario where art, science and technology converge.

## **We play with identity**

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Today, online life represents a significant aspect of their existence for millions of people on the planet. Participate, play and create in virtual worlds is an everyday social activity which has overcome the dichotomy between the virtual and the real.

Digital worlds present themselves as places that are open and free from judgement where we can give life to alternative or idealised versions of ourself. Spaces where anything is possible, including making friends, finding love or fighting together for a better world. It is in this relationship between the inside and outside of virtual worlds that new identities and new types of social relations are formed, both on- and off-screen.

## **We play with the margins**

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Today, in parallel to the million-dollar productions, video games represent a language which is complex, and at the same time within everyone’s reach. The



possibility to create video games without the need for financial investment thanks to the democratisation of digital media has enabled the emergence of a new generation of creators capable of challenging the established rules.

Such creation, that comes alive on the fringe of the industry, demonstrates an artisan style that asserts itself as an alternative to the uniformity of gaming design. It therefore becomes a political manifesto ideally directed at a new gamer citizenship.



"la Caixa" Foundation

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Press release

# ***Homo Ludens.***

## ***Video games to understand the present***

From 1 December 2021 to 18 April 2022

### **CaixaForum Barcelona**

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### **Times**

Monday to Sunday, from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

### **"la Caixa" Foundation Information Service**

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