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TAKE FIVE

The Best of Us

NEIL DRUCKMANN'S WINNING CONCEPT FOR HIS NOTEWORTHY GAME.

From a commercial perspective, making *The Last of Us,* the video game that earned Neil Druckmann the 2014 Writers Guild Award for videogame writing, didn't seem like the best idea.

First off, it wasn't part of an existing franchise. *The Last of Us* was wholly original content with no proven track record. It would've made more sense for Naughty Dog, the Santa Monica firm where Druckmann and his team develop games, to add another chapter to their popular *Uncharted* series. Sequels perform even better in the gaming realm than in the multiplexes. What's more, it was released at the end of the PlayStation 3's lifespan as a cash cow; the PS4 had already been announced, as well as the XBOX One, so most of Naughty Dog's competitors were targeting those newer consoles, with their accelerated processing units and stronger focus on multiplayer online gaming. *The Last of Us* was designed for the PS3's processor and graphics engine, with a multiplayer function that, while judged superb by reviewers, was somewhat overlooked by gamers.

Oh, and one of the two main characters was a 14-year-old girl. Not exactly a strong pull factor for what many consider (mistakenly, argues Druckmann) a male-dominated gamer audience.

"All those things on paper might seem like risks," Druckmann says. "But to us it seemed like an opportunity to explore something fresh and new, and not rest on our laurels and rely on the spectacle that made *Uncharted* so much fun to play, and instead make something much more personal, much more intimate. It paid off commercially and critically."

Personal and *intimate* are appropriate descriptors for *The Last of Us.* Although its postapocalyptic zombie-nation setting might seem like familiar ground for videogames, its story is far from simple shoot-'em-up fare. Ellie, the 14-year-old in question, shares a narrative and emotional journey with co-star Joel, whose daughter was killed by soldiers in the early moments of the outbreak. Although Joel initially resists his role as Ellie's caretaker and father figure, he soon comes to depend on her,

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both emotionally and, when he is critically injured partway through the game—as his own protector. In the end, Joel risks everything—*everything* here meaning "the continued existence of the human race"—to save Ellie, then lies to her about it, sparing her the burden of knowing what he gave up for her.

It's complex stuff without clear moral boundaries, which is probably what netted Druckmann the Writers Guild Award. While quick to point out that he's just one part of a team of hundreds that brought *The Last of Us* to market, he doesn't hide his enthusiasm at the victory's implications.

"It's important to me that games be recognized as a legitimate narrative art that is just as strong as film or comics or TV," he says. "Hopefully being recognized by the WGA and being talked about, we can get out there more and more that videogames are more than just shooting people and killing them. It's more than just Pac-Man gobbling. It's more than just an adrenaline rush. It can be about something meaningful and interesting that can actually move and affect people."

Anyone who has ever played *The Last of Us* might not be surprised at Druckmann's earnestness or his soft-spoken demeanor. The game itself is understated, with a serene, sunlit landscape that contrasts with the frustrated sense of loss that practically steams from each character's pores. The thrills are there, to be sure, but the game shines in the tense cinematic scenes that build Joel and Ellie's growing friendship.

Child's Play

Druckmann's drive to make videogames more of a writer's medium began at an early age, when as an Israeli child he taught himself English playing games like *King's Quest* and *Space Quest,* sitting at his computer with a Hebrew-English dictionary. His father brought him superhero comics during business trips to the United States and Canada, and he consumed these voraciously and then wrote his own comics as well. When he was 10 years old, his family moved to the States, where he set his sights on being a writer—albeit, with a somewhat roundabout plan: Begin as a criminology major at Florida State University. Go to law school. Become an FBI agent, where he'd accrue enough life experience to start writing novels.

But a computer programming elective in his third year in college changed everything. That's when he had the realization that every writer has: *It's someone's job to write the stuff I love.* So he changed his major to computer science, went to grad school at Carnegie Mellon, and eventually found himself a programming intern at Naughty Dog.

As he advanced at Naughty Dog, his roots showed; working on the company's long-running *Jak and Daxter* series, he asked to rewrite scenes he believed weren't working. Later, when he moved on to the *Uncharted* series, about a globetrotting,

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wisecracking treasure hunter (think Han Solo by way of Clive Cussler), he continued writing and designing. It was on *Uncharted* that he began working with Amy Hennig, a groundbreaking game designer known throughout the industry for her strong stance on the importance of good writing in games.

Gaming Women

Hennig is groundbreaking in another way as well: She's one of few women working in videogame design. Druckmann says her attention to detail and ability to deconstruct genre tropes was instrumental in his growth as a writer. Today, he's turned those tropes on their head by introducing Ellie to an audience presumed by many to be driven largely by testosterone and Mountain Dew, an audience that embraced her with open arms.

"There's a bait-and-switch that happens in *The Last of Us*, that you have this white hetero male protagonist that looks like he's the hero, he's the protector, he's the tough one," Druckmann says. "And you have this innocent 14-year-old girl. You might think, looking at the materials for the game, that you're protecting her, and at some point the roles switch. He gets incapacitated and she has to be the protector, both in story and in gameplay. That, to me, was the drive of the story, to get to that moment."

Crafting Ellie, her relationship with Joel, and her role in the game didn't happen without input from a lot of women, Druckmann says. Initially, he imagined the story as a reverse *Y the Last Man*, in which the zombie virus attacked only women, and Ellie was the only uninfected female left on Earth. But running the idea past the women on the design team revealed a tragic flaw: Such a game would consist substantially of killing zombified women.

"The idea could easily come off as misogynistic," he says. "I had a lot of time to reflect about the idea of moving forward [with that idea] and what might have become had we done it." At the same time, a series of web videos by feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian was making waves in the gaming community. In them, Sarkeesian examined a spectrum of women's roles in videogames, finding that women were often relegated to damsel-in-distress roles or background decoration.

"[The videos] were a wake-up call for me," Druckmann says. "To then look at the story and characters and say, 'When am I just using stereotypes, and when can we veer away from that?'"

Soon after, he heard from one of the most important women in his life: his newborn daughter.

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But even once the game was almost fully realized, he knew there was one more step: Focus testing, both for the game itself and its marketing. He knew there were plenty of female gamers out there. His goal was to reach them.

"When we're looking at stats for games, console games used to be male-dominated. The demographics of it were skewed toward men," he says. Over time, those numbers have shifted, and substantially more women are playing videogames now. The median age has gone up too. "For this game specifically, it could reach a wider audience. And we'd be foolish not to focus test marketing and gameplay on both genders, because both genders are gonna play the game."

The results: The game sold 1.3 million copies in the first week of its release, and 3.4 million copies in three weeks. It topped charts in a dozen countries.

Uncharted Terrority

And though gaming isn't going anywhere, it still has so much growing left to do, Druckmann says: "It's still such a young medium. As writers, we've just scratched the surface of what can be done with videogames."

Writing videogames could change the face of writing for

the screen. Before talkies, scripts looked a lot different. Even afterward, the format shifted around for a long time; check out the format on the original *Double Indemnity* script, for instance. And now, videogame writing has an even broader array of formats. Writing for a cinematic—what some gamers call a cut-scene—might look like standard screenwriting. But writing for an AI character might mean sketching out a variety of possible dialogue choices based on the situation. Ellie, for instance, reacts with shock the first time Joel kills someone in the game. As the story moves forward, she becomes desensitized to the violence. But it's possible to move through several scenes without killing any zombies, meaning she doesn't become desensitized as quickly.

"You're writing in patterns, instead of writing in a linear fashion," Druckmann explains. "I'm just starting to wrap my head around those concepts. And how do we expand on those concepts? It's intriguing, because you can't look at too many things to find examples of how you do it. We're figuring it out as we go."