Chasing the Stick

The History of Naughty Dog during the PS4 Era

By Max Roberts

Cover Art by Sam Wolfe
Logo by Max Roberts

"We feel that the interactive medium has an untapped potential to touch the feelings of the player. You have that connectivity. The fact that I am actually 'in the world and participating in what's happening on the screen in front of me,' gives us some sort of advantage to make you feel connected with what's actually happening. At Naughty Dog that's what we're trying to do is pair story and gameplay together. If we can make you feel like you're actually with these characters on a journey and you're invested in those stories and those characters then you're feeling, in theory, the same thing that their feeling."

- Bruce Straley

"All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible. This, I did."

- T. E. Lawrence, used in the opening of *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*

"After all we've been through. After everything I've done. It can't be for nothing."

- Ellie, *The Last of Us*

For Abby

Preface

I've always had an inclination toward Naughty Dog and their games. I first saw the *Crash Bandicoot* games around 2001-02 as a first or second grader at a neighbor's house. I was a Nintendo kid growing up, but I liked going over to their house just to play *Crash*. I thought Crash was cool. Around that same time, the *Jak and Daxter* games were also being released. I mooched a PS2 off a different neighbor to play bits and pieces of that series. I'd also be introduced to other PlayStation classics like *Sly Cooper* and *Kingdom Hearts*. It was my early indoctrination into the PlayStation Nation. I'd finally get my own PS2 second-hand around 2007. The first games I bought were from those three series.

The next Naughty Dog game I'd catch a glimpse of would alter my attention toward the studio from a passerby to an active seeker. Probably around 2009, I saw a demo kiosk for a PS3 and *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* inside a Target. I remember the demo vividly: It was the first section when you arrive in Nepal. A massive armored truck chases you down an alley while you run and shoot at its grill and engine. At the end of the alley, when I felt like I was running low on ammo, the truck burst into flames and I escaped. But I didn't really do those things, the character (who I

didn't know at the time), Nathan Drake, did them: I just controlled it. I think a connection was made then and there. Instead of using a cutscene, Naughty Dog games let me control the action and the story unlike anything I had experienced before.

From then on I was trying to get my hands on a PS3 and was acutely aware of Naughty Dog's next game. *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* was incoming and I could not wait. The reveal demo of the burning Chateau blew my mind. I wouldn't get my own PS3 until Christmas 2011, bundled with *Uncharted 3*. I played the first few opening chapters before putting the game down, determined to play the series in order. I borrowed *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* from a neighbor on Christmas Day. I played the entire game in one sitting the next day with my PS3 hooked up to my CRT television: I wasn't even playing in HD! I'd then go out and buy *Uncharted 2* and then finally play *Uncharted 3*.

A few weeks prior to that Christmas, on December 10, 2011, the Spike Video Game Awards revealed Naughty Dog's next game—*The Last of Us*. Leading into the awards, other teasers were dropped like breadcrumbs. I remember watching the cordyceps

fungus video and seeing the cracked newspaper casing. I was hooked from the get-go, before Naughty Dog was even attached to the game. Finally having my own PS3 just a couple weeks later, I was eagerly anticipating *The Last of Us*. I went on a total media blackout for it, even hiding my eyes and plugging my ears during the trailer at movie theaters.

Naughty Dog was my reason to own a PS3. I remember reviews for *The Last of Us* dropped on my birthday in 2013. Reading Colin Moriarty's 10/10 review on IGN was like unwrapping a birthday present. The game launched just over a week later on June 14, 2013. It is a time I will never forget.

I think the powerful allure of Naughty Dog games comes down to their uncanny ability to intertwine gameplay and storytelling. A saying that I've probably heard before, but it never clicked until writing this story, is "telling it on the stick." Simply put, it is a design decision to tell as much of the story via gameplay as possible. Using the joysticks before text boxes or cutscenes to tell the narrative. This actively puts the player in the shoes of the character, creating a unique, empathetic bond. It clicks with players on an emotional level. It certainly has with me.

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As *The Last of Us Part II* nears its release on June 19, 2020, I had an idea to write a history / editorial on the game. I had done so for *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*; this seemed like a logical next history piece for me. I love looking back, gathering context, and analyzing how a game came to be. I find it educational and helpful to provide that information all in one place. My eagerness and drive quickly got the better of me.

What started out as an idea to explore the history of *The Last of Us Part II* has (in a Naughty Dog-like fashion) turned into something more ambitious than I anticipated. I want to take a look at Naughty Dog's PS4 legacy; analyze their game design, explore their developmental history, and compile it all in one place. *The Last of Us Part II* didn't just happen out of thin air. It is a sum of years of hard work, lessons learned, and the tireless pursuit of perfectionism.

Part I: Introduction

Naughty Dog by the Numbers

I had a thought sometime in early 2020. While thinking about *The Last of Us Part II*, it dawned on me how many games Naughty Dog managed to release on PS4 in the span of nearly seven years. That thought evolved into a question: how did the rest of Sony's first party studios stack up in that same window of time?

Sony has had a remarkable trend throughout the PS4's lifecycle of delaying first party titles, giving their developers extra time to make their games better. Regularly, Sony allowed blockbuster titles to be pushed out of the highly coveted holiday shopping season. It seemed that quality was more important than hitting an internally targeted release date.

Sony First Party Releases

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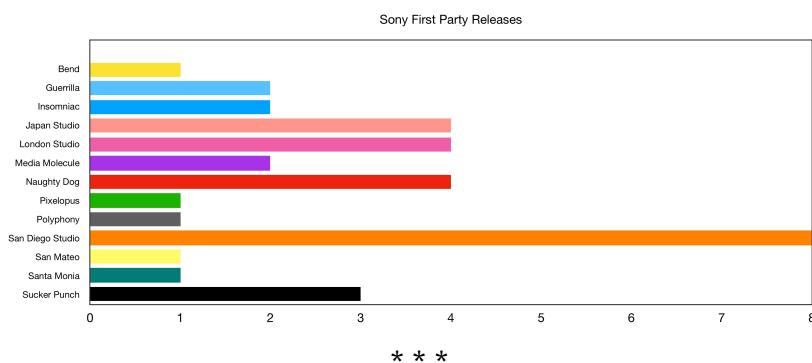
*This chart counts *The Last of Us Part II* from Naughty Dog, and *Ghost of Tsushima* from Sucker Punch. It does not include the *Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds* DLC from Guerrilla.

**It is important to note that Insomniac was purchased by Sony in 2019, near the end of the generation. Up until the purchase, Insomniac made numerous second party titles for various platforms of varying quality. Insomniac has released 14 games since 2014 according to Wikipedia, far outpacing any Sony first party studio. This data focuses solely on their PS4 exclusives during that time.

The clear king of output is San Diego Studio with their annualized *MLB The Show* series and the one-off game *Kill Strain*. Tying Naughty Dog for output is both London Studio and Japan Studio. London Studio released two *SingStar* titles and two PlayStation VR games; *PS VR Worlds* and *Blood & Truth*. Japan Studio, while publishing partners for quite a few games, developed *Knack*, *Knack 2*, *Gravity Rush 2*, and *Astro Bot Rescue Mission*. I also discovered that Japan Studio is a three team studio.

Quantity does not always translate to critical

quality though.
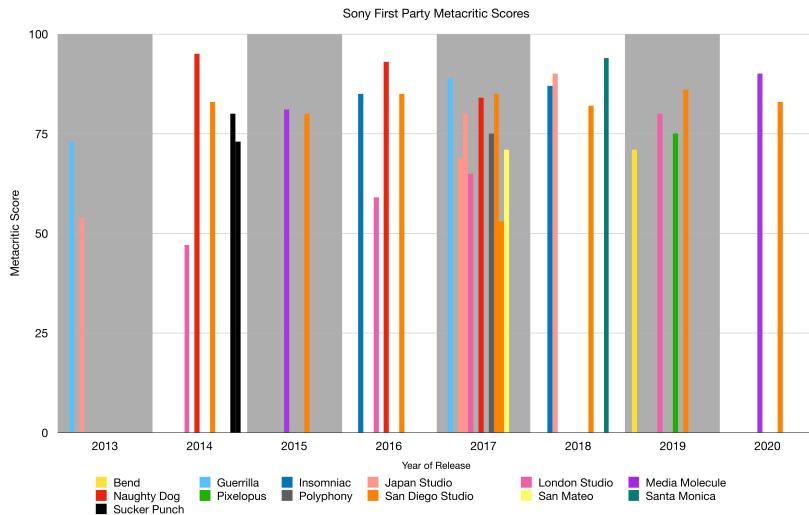
Sony First Party Metacritic Scores

*This chart was made before *The Last of Us Part II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* were released and reviewed critically.

2017 was by far the busiest year, but does not have quite the range in quality that 2014 did. All-in-all, Sony seems to have decent scores for their first party titles. Naughty Dog has two titles comfortably in the 90s, while *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* sits at an 84. They also barely beat out Sony Santa Monica's *God of War* (94) with *The Last of Us Remastered* (95). Remember, this is all before *The Last of Us Part II* has been released and reviewed.
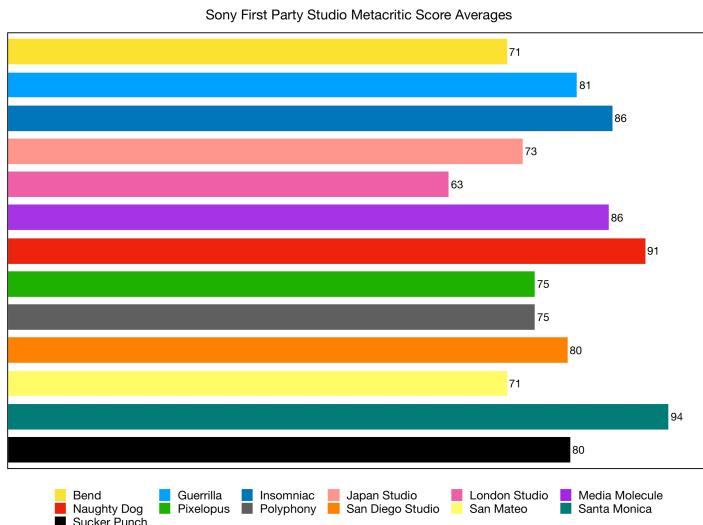
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Sony First Party Studio Metacritic Score Averages

Studio	Score
Bend	71
Guerrilla	81
Insomniac	86
Japan Studio	73
London Studio	63
Media Molecule	86
Naughty Dog	91
Pixelopus	75
Polyphony	75
San Diego Studio	80
San Mateo	71
Santa Monica	94
Sucker Punch	80

*This chart was made before *The Last of Us Part II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* were released and reviewed critically.

Taking each studio and averaging their whole team's scores throughout the generation continues to show a good track record for Sony's first party studios. Sony Santa Monica beats out Naughty Dog here because Sony Santa Monica only released one game, while Naughty Dog released three as of this writing. Here is a closer look at the studios' averages that match Naughty Dog's output.
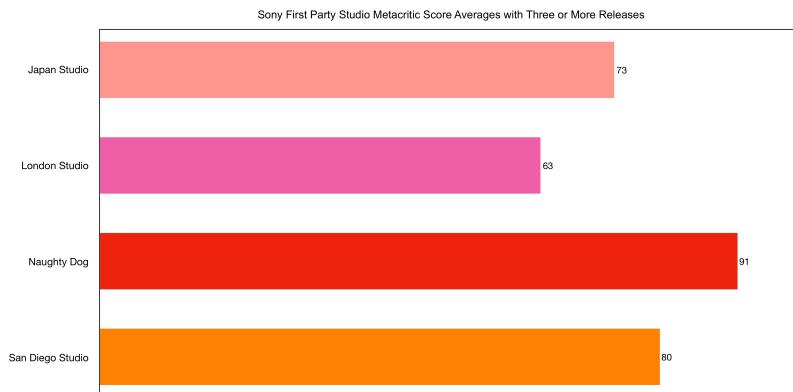
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Sony First Party Studio Metacritic Score Averages with Three or More Releases

| Studio	Score
Japan Studio	73
London Studio	63
Naughty Dog	91
San Diego Studio	80

*This chart was made before *The Last of Us Part II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* were released and reviewed critically. Sucker Punch is not included since *Ghost of Tsushima* will be their third game this generation.

Naughty Dog has a 10+ point lead ahead of second place, San Diego Studio. It is important again mention that San Diego Studio has double the output of Naughty Dog due to the annualized nature of the *MLB The Show* series.

As for how all this quantity and quality translates to sales, I don't have a conclusive answer. Video game sales are not as well defined as other industries. The only concrete numbers come directly from the publisher when they feel like sharing them, typically at significant milestones. According to my research, I

found seemingly conflicting data, so I decided to share both sides of information that I found.

Searching for "PS4 exclusive sales" in Google will quickly pull up a Wikipedia page with, you guessed it, the top selling PS4 exclusives. Looking at first party exclusives, *Uncharted 4* takes the cake at 16 million units with *Marvel's Spider-Man* in second place with 13.2 million units. The middle range includes members of the 10 million club, like *God of War* and *The Last of Us Remastered*. The bottom of the table has early PS4 titles like *Killzone Shadow Fall* and *Knack*. I have a hard time imagining those early launch titles haven't been bumped off. Websites like VGChartz claim titles like *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* have sold 2.4 million units, which beats out *Killzone* and *Knack* combined.

Mat Piscatella from the NPD Group tweeted a list of the top selling PS4 exclusives in the United States based on dollar sales (physical and digital copies) with *Marvel's Spider-Man* at the top. *Uncharted 4* was in fourth, behind *God of War* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*. It seems contradictory to the reports of *Uncharted 4* selling nearly 3 million more copies than *Marvel's Spider-Man*, but I have no trouble imagining that the

Web Slinger has or will surpass Nathan Drake.

One sliver I can discuss factually is the *Uncharted* series itself, since Sony has shared multiple milestones this generation. Back in June 2015, the *Uncharted* series had sold 21 million copies. This is before any of the three PS4 games were released, which means this 21 million is solely fueled by the PlayStation 3 and Vita. After *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* released in May 2016, the game sold 8.7 million copies by year's end. During the 10th Anniversary panel at PSX 2017, Naughty Dog and Sony revealed that the entire series had sold 41.7 million copies, including the *Nathan Drake Collection* and *The Lost Legacy*. By May 2019, *Uncharted 4* surpassed 15 million units sold.

Uncharted is not the only series from Naughty Dog that has performed extremely well on the PS4. In 2018, *The Last of Us* had sold over 17 million copies between both the PS3 and the PS4. Before *The Last of Us Remastered* released in June 2014, the original PS3 release sold over 7 million copies. I imagine it is safe to assume the bulk of that reported 17 million is the PS4 version. Industry analyst Daniel Ahmad reported that *The Last of Us* had sold over 20 million copies by October 2019.

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I think all of this data clearly indicates that Naughty Dog continues to be Sony's primary golden goose. Even before the PS4, Naughty Dog cranked out blockbusters on all three of Sony's previous hardware generations. No other first party studio at Sony consistently matches their output in quantity, quality, and sales.

Naughty Dog has never been more critically and financially successful. Beyond numbers, Naughty Dog has pushed both themselves and the video game industry by telling some of the most engaging narratives that leverage the unique abilities of gameplay to elicit empathy.

How did Naughty Dog actually pull it off though? What lessons did they learn, implement, and explore on the PS4? What did it cost their team, both personally and professionally? How has their PS4 catalog defined the studio in a way no previous generation has?

Recommended Reading and Viewing

Naughty Dog didn't just stroll into the PS4 generation and crush it. They've been a PlayStation titan for nearly 25 years. If you'd like to know their history up to the release of *The Last of Us* on PS3 in 2013, I highly recommend IGN's *Rising to Greatness: The History of Naughty Dog* by Colin Moriarty. Published in October 2013, Colin spent a ton of time talking to the people at Naughty Dog and wrote a definitive history on the studio. Part 5, which would have focused on *The Last of Us* specifically, never came to light, but the four published parts are an excellent chronological telling of the studio's history.

Another read that I found essential was the second chapter of *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels* by Jason Schreier aptly titled "Uncharted 4." Jason provides a look into the development of *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* through the lens of developer crunch, which is when staff work numerous extra hours to get a project out the door due to pressures put on by themselves or external factors. I'll pull a few choice quotes from the book, but that chapter (really, the whole book) offers a peek behind

the pixels that bring beloved games to life.

You can buy Jason's book on Amazon. Another option is to check out your public library! Some even allow you to rent books digitally through apps like Hoopla. I checked my library's digital catalog and they had *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*. It's certainly an option if you do not want to pay for the book and just want to read the *Uncharted 4* chapter.

For those who are more visually inclined, PlayStation produced a retrospective in 2014 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Naughty Dog. It covers the same era as Colin's history, but appears to gloss over some of the tougher times at the studio and has fewer sources. However, it's great to watch and hear the developers speak with accompanying visuals.

Another video recommendation is the documentary following the development of *The Last of Us* specifically. *Grounded: The Making of The Last of Us* follows Naughty Dog's attempt to be a two team studio and the creation of their most critically acclaimed property. It is on YouTube for free and gets two thumbs up from me.

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One last bit is this talk that Neil Druckmann gave at the Toronto chapter of the IGDA in 2013 about writing honestly. It sheds light on the creative process and origins of *The Last of Us*. It is a helpful talk to listen to as it covers the game *just* before this history really starts. I found it to be a fascinating talk, especially so many years later.

These recommendations are wonderful insights and provide longer term context for what I want to explore. They are not essential to follow along. With any specific quote or reference that I cite, I will do my best to provide an active link to. Check out this RSS link to a folder with all the links I cite in this piece.

Part II: The Last of Us

One Foot In and One Foot Out

"…we just couldn't hire enough talent fast enough to keep up with the demands of the game's expansions in terms of expectations of scope. At best we maybe got to one and a half, or probably more like one and a quarter teams." - Evan Wells

It is no secret that after *Uncharted 2,* Naughty Dog tried splitting into two development teams so they could co-develop two titles and give internal talent a chance to rise up. From this split, *Uncharted 2*'s Game Director Bruce Straley and Lead Game Designer Neil Druckmann were given the opportunity to make a brand new IP that ended up becoming *The Last of Us*.

The Last of Us released at the tail end of the PS3's lifecycle on June 14, 2013. The PS4 had already been announced earlier that year with more details to come at E3 2013. The PS4 would launch in North America on November 15, 2013, just five months after *The Last of Us* released. Despite this end of life release for the PS3, *The Last of Us* was met with unprecedented sales and critical praise.

Despite the success of *The Last of Us*, the two team

strategy at Naughty Dog was still trying to get off of the ground. After the release of *Uncharted 3* in November 2011, series creator Amy Hennig was given a small team to begin work on *Uncharted 4*, the studio's first major PS4 game.

The momentum going into the PS4 launch was intense. *Uncharted 4* accidentally leaked in a small behind-the-scenes video before *The Last of Us* even came out. It was not clearly *Uncharted* due to the characters looking like pirates, but the idea of Naughty Dog's PS4 title certainly helped amplify the next generation hype machine.

There was a through line of excitement for Naughty Dog on the PS4 throughout 2013. Taking lessons garnered through the rough transition from the PS2 to the PS3, Naughty Dog opted to keep the engine they built for *Uncharted* and *The Last of Us* for the PS4.

"We learned our lesson in saying, as we move into development into next-gen, we want to take our current engine, port it immediately over as is and say, 'Okay, we have a great AI system, we have a good rendering system,'" Straley said in an interview with

Digital Spy in May 2013. "When does the gameplay, when does the story, when does the world that we need to create — when does this engine hit the wall? Right, now we need to change this part of the engine."

When looking at their catalog of PS4 titles, the engine from 2013 seems far from the engine they have today. I can only imagine the walls they hit when trying to build a game like *Uncharted 4*. Building it over the course of the generation though, you can see the foundation that was established with the PS3.

On the eve of the PS4 launch, Naughty Dog announced two projects: The promised single-player DLC for *The Last of Us* and *Uncharted* on PS4. I distinctly remember waiting in line at GameStop for my PS4 and watching the *Uncharted* teaser over choppy cell phone service. These announcements also mark a unique time at the studio when they had two publicly announced projects for two different platforms/generations. But inside Naughty Dog, one title was getting significantly more attention than the other.

Left Behind was originally projected to come out in a December-January timeframe, thanks to a PS Blog

post detailing the DLC plans for the game. Naughty Dog's first single-player DLC would not get a confirmed release date until mid-January. *Left Behind* would come out on Valentine's Day in 2014. This small delay would continue the unfortunate trend that began with *The Last of Us*: All but one new Naughty Dog title this generation would be publicly delayed.

After the release of *Left Behind*, Druckmann and Straley had a brief opportunity to kick around new ideas. One of these was a sequel to *The Last of Us*. Druckmann had actually pitched the idea for the sequel to Ashley Johnson, the actress who plays Ellie, when pitching the story of *Left Behind*, which presumably happened back in 2013. By the time *Left Behind* was done, Druckmann claimed it was a "50/50" shot that there would be a sequel during a reddit AMA.

In an interview with Laura Hudson for Wired that focused on *Left Behind*, Druckmann was more open about the ideas floating around in his head for a potential sequel. This interview was published on February 18, 2014, just four days after *Left Behind* released.

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"I still have this script written, this story about Ellie's mom [for] an animated short we were going to do, but it fell through. I'd love for that to see the light of day sometime, maybe as a DLC or a comic book," Druckmann said. "We're brainstorming the next [Naughty Dog] project right now; some of the ideas are sequel ideas and some are brand-new IP. We're just trying to see where our passions lie. Is there more to do here [in *The Last of Us*] both on a mechanical level or a narrative level, so we're not repeating ourselves? Or is it [sic] this a good point to say goodbye to the characters in this world? It's a very heavy decision, because whichever direction we go in commits us for the next three to four years. So we're going to take several weeks to make that decision."

*Italics added

The Last of Us was such a huge success for both Naughty Dog and Sony that a movie adaptation was announced on March 6, 2014. The movie was to be written and produced by Druckmann with Straley, Evan Wells, Christophe Balestra, and Sam Raimi producing the film. It would be published under Raimi's Ghost House Pictures company and Screen Gems. The success of the game was undeniably

massive.

Work on the teaser for *The Last of Us Part II* started around this time. It was filmed later in the summer of 2015, but there was an energy and direction within Naughty Dog to push ahead with a sequel to *The Last of Us*. That early momentum would have to abruptly stop though: *Uncharted 4* was in trouble. Druckmann, Straley, and the team would not have several weeks to decide what their next project would be. It had already been decided for them.

The development of *The Last of Us* and its DLC would prove to be a bit more demanding than Naughty Dog's vision of running two teams simultaneously. The scope, drive, and ultimate success of *The Last of Us* would be an essential element that would help set the stage for Naughty Dog's PS4 development. The rise of Druckmann and Straley alongside the inability to give two games the attention they deserved would shape the studio for an entire console generation. *Uncharted 4* would quickly become an all hands on deck situation, leaving ideas for a sequel to *The Last of Us* kicking around for years.

In the beginning of March 2014, Amy Hennig left

Naughty Dog. It was originally reported on March 4, 2014, by IGN that she had been ousted by Druckmann and Straley. Naughty Dog's Co-Presidents at the time, Evan Wells and Christophe Balestra, made a public statement vehemently denying this claim. They were responsible for all studio affairs.

Hennig's departure shot up a flare for *Uncharted 4*'s development. It was in dire straits and needed a clear vision to finish the game. Druckmann and Straley would step in to try and get the game back on its feet and moving, but they would end up carrying Nate's final adventure across the finish line.

Part III: Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

Fighting the Enemy of Perfect

"We couldn't take what was there, because that was part of the problem. There was a breakdown in both the gameplay and the story side of things." - Bruce Straley

When it comes to *Uncharted 4*'s development, the book (or rather, the chapter) has already been written. As mentioned in the recommended reading section, Jason Schreier dedicated a whole chapter in his first book *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels* to the development crunch that drove *Uncharted 4*. I don't want to lift everything from that chapter. I highly encourage you to check it out yourself. Instead of taking Jason's work (which would be illegal), I want to lay out the game's development timeline then explore the design decisions that Naughty Dog implemented and the lessons they took on.

Before fully committing my attention to *Uncharted 4* though, I need to talk about Naughty Dog's first PS4 title - *The Last of Us Remastered*.

On April 9, 2014, just over a month after Hennig's departure, Naughty Dog revealed they were developing their hit PS3 swan song for the PS4. It

would include all DLC, including *Left Behind*, and would take advantage of the new console's power.

To hype up the PS4 release, Sony and Naughty Dog held a special "One Night Live" performance of select scenes retelling the game's story. Fans in Santa Monica, CA could attend in person, where a special epilogue was performed exclusively for them. For the rest of the world, Sony streamed the event live, ending the stream before the epilogue.

At the time, Druckmann said that the epilogue was solely written for the live audience that evening and would not be considered canon. You can read about the epilogue here, if you wish.

Porting *The Last of Us* to the PS4 gave Naughty Dog a chance to port their PS3 engine over to the PS4 like they had discussed in early 2013. This likely helped the team familiarize themselves with the PS4 architecture and prepare to push themselves with *Uncharted 4*. Porting *The Last of Us* was no cake walk though.

"I wish we had a button that was like 'Turn On PS4 Mode,' but no. We expected it to be Hell, and it was

Hell. Just getting an image onscreen, even an inferior one with the shadows broken, lighting broken and with it crashing every 30 seconds… that took a long time," Druckmann said in an interview with Edge Magazine in May 2014. "These engineers are some of the best in the industry and they optimized the game so much for the PS3's SPUs specifically. It was optimized on a binary level, but after shifting those things over [to PS4] you have to go back to the high level, make sure the [game] systems are intact, and optimize it again."

The History of *Uncharted 4*

When Hennig left in March 2014, it thrust Druckmann and Straley into the lead roles for the game. The project needed a clear vision and decisive leadership. Large chunks of Hennig's story were cut and gameplay systems were whittled down to a core group of mechanics.

The next time the public would see anything from *Uncharted 4* would be at E3 2014 where another teaser would be shown off. This teaser actually showed Nate washed up on some beach with narration from both himself and his lifelong partner Sully about getting back into the treasure hunting game one last time. It certainly set a somber mood and gave the world a 2015 release window.

After E3, Naughty Dog's next target was to get a demo ready for public eyes. The venue chosen was the first PlayStation Experience, also known as PSX. On December 7, 2014, Straley kicked off the showcase with a live, 15-minute demo of *Uncharted 4*. It was certainly a live demo, since Nate fell through the floor of the game world, resulting in a death and respawn.

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When watching the demo today, it is impressive to see how much of the demo ended up in the final game two years later. Beyond broad strokes, the structure of this specific combat encounter is the same; most of the quips that Nate says stayed put. The grappling hook was an exciting addition that showed off both combat and navigational versatility. Climbing, a pillar of *Uncharted*'s game design, showed more user-fidelity by allowing players to have Nate reach out in any direction with striking fluidity. The piton strikes me as a compromise to the climbing mechanic idea of being able to shoot handholds that Straley mentioned in *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*.

The juicy 15-minute demo was not the only bit of *Uncharted 4* information from PSX 2014. There was also a panel discussing how the studio was bringing the character of Nathan Drake to the PS4. The attention to detail in Nate's arms alone is bonkers. With the power of the PS4, Naughty Dog was able to shift to real-time cutscenes as opposed to pre-rendered ones. The Nate character model you saw in cutscenes was the same model you played with, further grounding the player in the game world.

All would be quiet on the public facing front with

Uncharted 4 for another six months. Inside Naughty Dog, the struggle to push the *Uncharted* finale out the door was more real than ever. Their next goal and deadline was E3 2015. The demo they would showcase here was grander than any demo Naughty Dog had ever shown before. And the excitement it generated would help fuel the creative tank at Naughty Dog to finish the game.

The E3 2015 demo closed the show and once again proved that Naughty Dog runs their demos live. It kicked off with Nate not moving for 30 or so seconds. After restarting, the demo went off without a hitch from then on. The portion of the game that was shown was the iconic Madagascar chase. Going from shootout to a car chase (introducing driving into the series for the first time), the demo was thrilling top to bottom. The behind-closed-doors demo at E3 continued the set piece into the caravan and the motorcycle chase. Naughty Dog would stream and release that portion of gameplay to the public in July, feeding the hype of fans even more.

The Madagascar chase works extremely well as both an *Uncharted* set piece and as a demo for press and fans. It ups the ante for the franchise, thanks to

the power of the PS4 and all the experience under Naughty Dog's belt. It has a wonderful sense of escalation. I actually think Dunkey put it best in his *Videogame Structure Evolution* video. *Uncharted 4* has an undeniable cadence in its design.

Despite all of the bombastic demos that had been shown off so far, the release window of 2015 was becoming unrealistic for the studio to meet. On August 31, 2015, *Uncharted 4* was given a new release date of March 18, 2016. Special editions were also announced, alongside a season pass confirming the existence of single-player DLC for *Uncharted*, a first for the series. This would be the first of numerous delays, the most Naughty Dog has had to this day.

October 2015 would prove to be a substantial month for the franchise as a whole. The *Nathan Drake Collection* was released on October 7, 2015. Remastered ports of the first three games were done by Bluepoint Games instead of Naughty Dog. This would help tide fans over and open up millions of new PS4 owners to the series. On October 16, 2015, Nathan Drake's actor, Nolan North, finished all his motion capture for the game and brought an end to his role as the star of one of PlayStation's marquee franchises. This was a

significant milestone for the game and for Nolan. The game's multiplayer mode was revealed toward the end of the month, letting fans take a peek at the other half of *Uncharted 4*.

Both PSX 2015 and The Game Awards were coming up in December during the same week and it proved to be a good time to, once again, sound the drum for public hype, as the game's release date was fast approaching. At The Game Awards on December 3, 2015, a new character was revealed in a stylish cinematic and a snazzy trailer composed of quick cuts and action scenes from the two previous demos. That character was Nadine Ross, a South African mercenary commander who clearly did not mess around with Nate. Nadine is played by Laura Bailey, which stirred up controversy online.

As astutely pointed out by the Internet, Nadine is a black character, while Laura is white. This caused a seemingly endless debate around Naughty Dog's decision. Druckmann addressed it numerous places, including the 2015 PSX panel. In an interview with Greg Miller on *PS I Love You XOXO*, Druckmann clearly explained the casting decision. Laura had auditioned before the design of Nadine had been

locked in. She was auditioning for a South African woman. Laura's chemistry on set with the other actors was a level above other auditions. Druckmann and the team knew she'd be the best Nadine. Then her design came in and they felt just as strong about her look. When the two were put together in production, the team knew they had found their Nadine Ross.

"That's what's kinda awesome of our medium is that you don't have to look like a character. If you did, Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson could not play their roles. Troy is not a heavy-set 50 year-old Texan. Ashley is not a 14 year-old—like in the movie version, they can't play those roles, and they played those roles perfectly. And another example, and I feel like I have to bring it up just because of the discussion, the same thing with *Uncharted 4*, there is another big character that we are not revealing — too much of a spoiler — that is being played by a black actor and it's a white character. And again, and there, that was the best choice," Druckmann said on *PS I Love You XOXO* at PSX 2015.

The other reveal at PSX 2015 was the introductory cutscene with Sam and Nate seeing each other for the first time in years. This cutscene showed fans the

slower side of *Uncharted 4*, which allowed for relationships to develop in an attempt to tell a more mature and rich story, while pulling the player in on a deeper emotional level. The introduction of Nate's long lost brother Sam meant the story had a long way to go to make the player care the way that Nate did. The trailer also revealed the new gameplay mechanic for dialogue options. You all know the right answer.

Development was still slammed and the game was coming into its March 2016 window at lightning speed. Naughty Dog was looking at a significant day one patch to bring *Uncharted 4* up to snuff if they were to hit the March release date. According to *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, the then president of Sony Computer Entertainment America (SCEA), Shawn Layden, called Naughty Dog co-president Evan Wells one night in December 2015 and offered the studio an April shipping date. On December 22, 2015, the delay was announced. *Uncharted 4* would now be released on April 26, 2016.

The final delay would not be Naughty Dog's fault though. March 1, 2016, saw the final delay for *Uncharted 4*. The game was pushed to May 10, 2016, due to manufacturing issues for Sony's European

division. Shawn Layden made the statement on the PlayStation Blog instead of having Naughty Dog make the announcement. The end of the game was finally in sight though.

Exploring the Design Legacy of
Uncharted 4

I remember the launch day extremely well. I was pumped to the max. I had my Libertalia edition pre-ordered on Amazon, anxiously awaiting its delivery. I actually rented the game for $4 at a RedBox that morning, installed the game and its day one patch on my PS4, then returned the game so I could play "my" copy first. I even went to a Best Buy, bought the game for the pre-order bonus coin, then immediately returned the game and kept the coin. I had waited a long time for Nate's final outing.

How do you approach the end of a beloved and successful series? With *Uncharted 4*, Naughty Dog stretched their design in all sorts of directions. Naughty Dog took lessons from *The Last of Us* and looked at them through an *Uncharted* lens. The primary mission was putting the story on the stick as much as possible while providing a wide-linear approach that gave players more choice in execution than ever before. Secondarily, Naughty Dog focused on introducing new mechanics, refining series staples, and keeping the scope of gameplay in check.

* * *

By far, the most choice is offered to the player in the Madagascar exploration section. Before the bonkers chase that was shown at E3 2015, the game has the player exploring an environment at the foot of a volcano. Using a 4x4 to drive around, the player would drive from landmark to landmark however they saw fit and explore them at their pace. Some locations, mandatory or optional, had enemy encounters, which now incorporated stealth. Instead of having combat arenas forcing loud shootouts, *Uncharted 4* gives the player real choice. Enemy AI has the ability to lose track of Nate, giving combat the opportunity to have an ebb and flow between shootouts and skulking in the brush.

Updating both the enemy and buddy AI from *The Last of Us* and previous *Uncharted* games, the player gets to choose how to use the tools given to them to engage in combat. The grappling hook, primarily a navigation tool, gives momentum and verticality to combat allowing you to swing from place to place, climb towers, and fly onto enemies from above for the most satisfying superman punch. You could use stealth to pick off foes or fire off your guns and then hide, causing the enemy to scatter and search.

* * *

This expansion upon player choice is often called wide-linearity. Naughty Dog tells linear stories inside linear games. The player's goal is to move from point A to point B to progress the game with the narrative as the carrot dangling ahead of them. With *Uncharted 4*, that linearity has been widened to give more agency to the player. Moving forward is still the way to progress in the game, but how you get there is up to you within the options presented. Climbing now has multiple routes. Gunfights have that ebb and flow I discussed. Exploration is larger than ever before, while not becoming an open world with seemingly endless choices. Wide-linearity gives Naughty Dog the ability to tell their story while the player makes choices with the given tools they enjoy, which creates player agency. It also gives players more of an opportunity to develop empathy.

Outside of combat, at every possible chance, the player is executing the story rather than it being told to them in a disjointed way. When driving through Madagascar, natural conversation occurs between Nate, Sully, and Sam. If you get out of the car to explore, the systems behind-the-scenes remember where the conversation stopped only to naturally pick

it back up when returning to the car. Optional conversations give observant players (or trophy hunters) an opportunity to dig deeper and build relationships alongside the world. It all may just be button presses, but the active role the player has enriches the story by giving the player agency. The player becomes the character.

A far more pivotal moment in the game is when Elena comes back for Nate on the island. The last time both Nate and the player saw her, she caught Nate in his lie and left him. The two have to navigate the Libertalia to escape, but their relationship is cracked. Like shoving a puzzle piece where it doesn't quite belong, their relationship and interactions in the beginning feel off. While there is some combat, most of their time together is exploration and environmental puzzle solving while the two talk on and off.

One could imagine this chunk of the game playing out like this:

a) Elena saves Nate
b) The two traipse across the island toward their escape

c) Using Elena's near-death explosion to have Nate realize what this life will cost him

d) Marriage fixed. Yay!

Instead, Naughty Dog uses this span of a few chapters to slowly and deliberately rebuild. This portion of the game was intentionally designed to use gameplay as the storytelling medium, rather than a pair of cutscenes. The player has the necessary time to mend the bridge between Nate and Elena, which also needs to be fixed within the player themselves; especially those that have been with these characters since the beginning.

"The player is feeling that they're just not quite together, and the music is reflecting that, and the art is reflecting that. And slowly we're putting them in situations where they have to be closer together—they have to start boosting each other over obstacles, for instance—and by the end they're caught up in a trap, in a net, right on top of each other, and they kind of have to face this fact that they're meant for each other. Through gameplay, you kind of rekindle that relationship," Druckmann said in the introduction of *The Art of Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*.

* * *

Uncharted 4's design language is a fusion of Naughty Dog's PS3 legacy, while pushing their storytelling forward in richer ways. Wide-linearity would become a staple in future Naughty Dog titles. Nate's final adventure changed the studio for the rest of the PS4 generation. Their never ending goal of fusing better storytelling with gameplay would press on as both new *Uncharted* and *The Last of Us* titles would be revealed before the end of the year. 2017 would become a year of challenges for the studio; both from a production and a management perspective.

Studio leadership would change in a way that it hadn't since the studio co-founders Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin left the company in 2004. Allegations of sexual harassment would be brought to light. Naughty Dog would also press forward with co-developing two games, while ambitions for both outgrew their original scope. Halfway through the PS4's lifecycle, Naughty Dog would be taking on its biggest challenges ever.

Part IV: Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

Checking Ambition

"Sometimes we have a design idea that's so unusual that it could support the story in a better way than a cutscene. So we find a way to incorporate it into the story, no matter what the complexity and the cost." - Marianne Hayden

After the long-awaited release of *Uncharted 4*, Naughty Dog began prototyping their next two titles, according to Jason Schreier in *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*. Looking at game director Kurt Margenau's LinkedIn profile indicates that the prototype phase for *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* started right after *Uncharted 4*. It is incredibly impressive that *The Lost Legacy* would go from prototype to release 15 months later.

Fans would not have to wait long to learn what was happening inside Naughty Dog. A reveal would happen at PSX 2016. The show would open with the reveal of *The Lost Legacy.* Ironically, it was the intro of the game itself with its leading lady donning a shroud. Chloe Frazer was the star with Nadine Ross as her partner and the game appeared to take place in India. It was also revealed to be a stand-alone game, indicating a scope far outside DLC for *Uncharted 4*. The season pass for *Uncharted 4*, which cost $25, was

removed from digital stores on December 13 after Naughty Dog gave fans a heads up. Fans could lock in the digital version of *The Lost Legacy* at the cheaper price if they bought the pass before then.

As Shawn Layden closed the PSX 2016 presentation, he left fans with that special "one more thing" moment.

"The game is in early development, super early. But the team behind it wanted to share this with you guys today. This is from their updated engine, running on PS4. All I'm gonna say is thank you for coming and enjoy," Shawn stated before the teaser rolled.

I knew immediately when the teaser started that it was another Naughty Dog game, or so I wrote on my old blog, but I didn't expect it to be *The Last of Us Part II*. It was an extremely exciting weekend to have two new Naughty Dog games announced. *The Lost Legacy* seemed to outgrow the confinements of only being the previously announced single-player DLC for *Uncharted 4*. As for *The Last of Us Part II*, Druckmann took to the PlayStation Blog to give fans a post regarding the announcement.

* * *

"…while a sequel may have seemed like a foregone conclusion, that wasn't the case. We knew that it needed to be a story worth telling and, perhaps more importantly, a story worthy of Joel and Ellie. After spending years on different ideas (and almost giving up), we finally uncovered a story that felt special—a story that evolved into an epic journey. It's still early days for the project—the game's release is a ways off —but we couldn't wait any longer to give you a glimpse of what's to come," Druckmann said.

That night, video game news site Kotaku broke a story that Straley would not be returning to direct *The Last of Us Part II*. Written by Jason Schreier, sources claimed that Straley would be taking a yearlong sabbatical. Sony would provide a statement the following morning on December 4, 2016, confirming that Straley was taking some "much deserved time off."

The beginning of 2017 was quiet as the studio worked away on two new games. *Uncharted 4* reached 8.7 million copies sold in just seven months. It wouldn't be until March 2017 that news from the Kennel would start to roll out for the year.

* * *

On March 8, 2017, Co-President Christophe Balestra announced his retirement from Naughty Dog via a blog post. He would officially leave on April 3, 2017. Balestra was one of the two developers assigned the co-president title when Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin left in 2004. Balestra had started at Naughty Dog in 2002. Evan Wells would be the sole president of Naughty Dog going forward.

A week after Balestra's departure in April, Naughty Dog announced the release date and price for *The Lost Legacy*. Fans would be able to play Chloe and Nadine's adventure in short time when it launched on August 22, 2017, for $40. For the first time since *Uncharted 3*, Naughty Dog would hit their initially announced release date, too!

At E3 2017, *Uncharted* would be Naughty Dog's only game present. *The Lost Legacy* opened the press conference with a, frankly, odd musical intro and water show before launching into a brand new story trailer. The press would get to see a demo behind closed doors. Fans would have to wait until June 20, 2017, to see the demo for themselves, when Naughty Dog streamed it worldwide, just like they did for the second half of *Uncharted 4*'s E3 2015 demo.

* * *

Another demo would be shown off in July, which revealed the wide open Western Ghats chapter of the game. This section gave players unprecedented freedom and choice about where to go and how to tackle certain encounters. It would also house the first side quest in *Uncharted* history.

The Lost Legacy launched right on time on August 22. I distinctly remember the day as I was taking care of my parent's apartment and their cats while they were out of town. My day was wide open, so I hooked up my PS4 to their big ole TV and sound system and played the whole eight-ish hour game in one sitting. I ended up reviewing it as well.

The Lost Legacy was directed by Shaun Escayg and Kurt Margenau. It was written by Josh Scherr. Escayg was the Creative Director. He left in 2018 to join Crystal Dynamics. Margenau had been with Naughty Dog since 2008 in the *Uncharted 2* days. He was a Lead Game Designer on *Uncharted 4* and is now the Co-Game Director on *The Last of Us Part II*. Scherr was a writer on *Uncharted 4* and is also working on *The Last of Us Part II*.

* * *

During a GDC 2018 talk, Scherr revealed that the original schedule was built with four hours of game time in mind. *The Lost Legacy*'s scope seems to have quickly ballooned into the 8-10 hours that it became. I could not discern if that expansion was crammed into the original schedule. As a one-off line in an article regarding crunch, Jason Schreier reported that one developer said *The Lost Legacy* was the worst crunch they had ever experienced. It is pretty remarkable that they were able to fully develop and release a game of *Uncharted 4*'s visual and gameplay fidelity, that is also around the same length of *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, in just 15 months. In an interview on ASIS Game Maker's Notebook, Druckmann briefly mentioned how *The Lost Legacy* outgrew its original scope.

"*Lost Legacy* had to take a bunch of resources from *The Last of Us* [*Part II*]," Druckmann said when discussing why *The Last of Us Part II* was not at E3 2017. This trade off in resources and focus would ultimately inspire *The Last of Us Part II*'s next reveal at Paris Games Week 2017.

The (re)Active Cinematic Experience

The Lost Legacy presented Naughty Dog with a unique opportunity to swiftly address criticisms players had with *Uncharted 4*. Instead of waiting multiple years for a sequel to see how *Uncharted* would change, *The Lost Legacy* allowed for fresh criticism to be implemented head on. A prime example was found in the differences between the climbing portions of the two games. *Uncharted 4*'s climbing sections were considered by some to be awfully long. Turns out that the previously mentioned mechanic of shooting handholds was scrapped late in development, meaning that the team could not redesign those sections without reworking significant portions of the game. With that knowledge and eventual criticism, *The Lost Legacy*'s climbing was built from the ground up knowing that the mechanic would not be present, which resulted in much snappier climbing sections.

The Lost Legacy is also a testament to Naughty Dog's well established dedication to detail. They don't just make beautiful games, but make beautifully rich,

dense games that mirror the real world whenever possible. Take the map in the Western Ghats chapter of the game. As the player explores the space, Chloe marks up a map with potential areas to explore and places they've been. As pointed out by Kirk Hamilton of Kotaku near the game's launch, the map Chloe pulls out and marks in her animation is the same map when player's press the map button to see it in full screen. Clarified in the same article by Margenau, the maps are the exact same, because when players click the map button, the in-game camera swings down to the map in Chloe's hands. This keeps everything in-game allowing for smooth transitions that keep players immersed.

Another visual element with insane attention to detail is Chloe's watch. Margenau wouldn't tweet about this detail until 2019. The watch runs in real time with the occasional reset to a pertinent time in certain cutscenes. This was all in the hope that the watch would reflect an accurate time when users enter Photo Mode. It's this kind of attention to detail that I love to know is there.

Naughty Dog included a new type of collectable in the game. Beside the usual artifacts and the previously

added optional conversations, this time around there would also be photo vistas or scenes that Chloe could snap a picture of on her Sony phone.

This new type of collectable serves multiple purposes. At a high level, it gives players an incentive to intentionally look at and enjoy multiple scenic views. The art team has to spend a significant amount of time creating these vistas. Naughty Dog prides itself on creating gorgeous game worlds. It makes sense to want players to look at the game more closely.

At the mid level, Naughty Dog answers the question of how do we get players to check out the scenery on a game mechanics level. They do this through internal and external systems. Internally, *The Lost Legacy* has Chloe use her cell phone to capture these images. It is a grounded device that makes sense to the player. Taking pictures with the in-game camera will typically open up optional conversations. It helps tell the story of the world and characters by having the player execute the act of photography. It helps tell the story on the stick.

The external mechanics are built into the PS4 itself. Since the photos are a collectable, they count toward

unlocking a trophy for snapping all optional pictures in the game. This feeds into the trophy system on PSN and gives players a reward that can be shown off, especially if the player unlocks all trophies for the Platinum trophy. There is also the Share feature, so integral to the PS4 that there is a dedicated Share button on the controller. Players have the option to share these snapshots with friends on social media. They can also use the game's built in Photo Mode to strike poses, change Chloe's face, and capture rad moments: All at anytime in the game, including cutscenes.

How all these mechanics come to be is through some serious technical chops. To make these systems, the gameplay and cinematics have to be rendered in real time and in-game. Everything is happening at once so that the camera can be manipulated as needed to show accurate and great looking information. From a map to a scenic view to a well-directed cutscene, the game has to be ready for user input.

The Lost Legacy proved quite a bit for Naughty Dog. It proved that the studio could turn out a game of high quality in shorter periods of time. It proved that *Uncharted* could go on without Nathan Drake. It

reaffirmed their ambitions often exceed any expectations, internally or externally. It brought different developers into the director chair. It allowed Naughty Dog to experiment with ideas that pushed their wide-linear design while still in early development for *The Last of Us Part II*.

Coming Forward

Nearly one month after the release of *The Lost Legacy*, Naughty Dog announced its second major departure for the year. Bruce Straley was not returning from his sabbatical. Straley and Naughty Dog President Evan Wells wrote individual posts announcing Straley's departure. Straley was with Naughty Dog for 18 years, best known for being the Game Director on *Uncharted 2* and *Uncharted 4*, along with co-creating and directing *The Last of Us*.

Following the last three projects that Straley worked on, it is not difficult at all to imagine why Straley took the sabbatical and why he ended up not returning. These games clearly demanded quite a bit from each person on the team. Straley has gone on to consult and help shape much smaller experiences. In 2018, he helped create a VR experience that used a real actor in the play space while the player was in the virtual world. While Straley may have left Naughty Dog, it is clear to me that he is still interested in immersing players into the game and the story through interactivity.

In October 2017, Naughty Dog faced public

allegations it had never had before. On Saturday, October 14, 2017, former Multiplayer Level Layout Artist David Ballard claimed he was sexually harassed by a lead at Naughty Dog. Ballard made his statement via Twitter and Facebook. Ballard said that he had a mental breakdown in February 2016, which resulted in Sony HR becoming involved. When Ballard told HR about the harassment, Ballard said he was promptly fired the next day and was offered $20,000 dollars to agree to the termination and not discuss it with anyone. He declined to sign.

The next day, Sunday, October 15, Naughty Dog made a statement in response. Naughty Dog said they had found no evidence that Ballard had reported harassment in any way, both at Naughty Dog and at Sony. The company also said they have and always will take reports like these seriously as they value every single one of their employees.

The following day Jason Schreier published an article with three Naughty Dog sources speaking under the promise of anonymity. All three employees that Schreier spoke to had not heard about Ballard's allegations until he made them public. These employees confirmed Ballard's mental breakdown at

work. They even claimed he sent a hostile email to another artist while copying the entire company on it.

Ballard gave a response at the end of October to the website The Sixth Axis. Ballard was not going to name the people involved due to people's safety and hoped his coming forward would make people aware of workplace harassment and give people "the ability to not stay silent." Ballard also hoped "to heal from all this and regain my dignity and respect."

Seven months later, in May 2018, Ballard would speak out again: This time naming his harasser and the other people involved. Ballard tweeted on May 7, 2018, stating that two and a half years after the harassment and prompt firing that he still did not feel like he had "dignity and respect because of it." Three days later, Ballard named his harasser. Ballard claimed it was Robert Cogburn, a lead game designer with a focus on multiplayer layout. Cogburn had left Naughty Dog in January 2018. Ballard also named former Co-President Balestra for accusing Ballard of wanting to fire Cogburn. Ballard also named the Sony HR employee whom he told about the harassment.

I could find no other statement made from either

party after this. Ballard's LinkedIn profile does suggest a timeline where his unemployment does not entirely line up with the claimed 17 months in his original statement. From June 2016 through August 2016, he worked as an artist at Turbo Button for a Google Daydream VR title. From November 2017 to May 2018, he worked at Giant Squid as a Game Designer. In January 2019, he started at Amazon Game Studios, where, as of this writing, he currently works.

2017 was a year of highs and lows for Naughty Dog. Multiple leaders left the company, while new developers rose to the challenge to continue enriching the studio's legacy. One project would go from conception to release, while another began a fuller, longer, more difficult development. The future of Naughty Dog and the PS4 would be slowly built out over the remaining three to four years of the PS4's life cycle. The sequel to their last generation masterpiece and swan song would take center stage. It was time for *The Last of Us Part II*.

Part V: The Last of Us Part II

Managing the Kennel

"It's hard to describe the immense pressure of following up the first game." - Neil Druckmann

Before jumping into 2018, I want to touch on some developments for *The Last of Us Part II* that I either glossed over or skipped while talking about *The Lost Legacy*. Specifically, a key hire that the company made back in July 2016, just two short months after releasing *Uncharted 4*. Halley Gross was hired to be the co-writer of *The Last of Us Part II*. Gross has written episodes of HBO's *Westworld* and TNT's adaption of *Snowpiercer*. The earliest inklings of her working at Naughty Dog are a string of funny tweets with model weapons for motion capture. Gross would officially announce her involvement with the project when the game was revealed at PSX 2016.

The PSX 2016 teaser was also paired with a PSX panel hosted by Greg Miller featuring Neil Druckmann, Ashley Johnson, and Troy Baker. The panel was a great move to give fans tiny bits of information for a game so early in development. Druckmann shared the story of when he pitched both

the *Left Behind* DLC and his idea for *The Last of Us Part II*. It shows us how early an idea can come around. By no means will this initial pitch be the entire story fans will experience in the final game. Druckmann said as much in an interview with Luke Winkie for Variety on June 13, 2018.

"I fooled myself thinking that I had a good idea when they were all really bad, so I'm glad we got to take a break with '*Uncharted 4*' so I could take a break for an extra three years to think about these characters, and what kind of story would compliment the first one well," Druckmann said. "The first ideas were very plot-driven and focused on some surface stuff, and I lost sight of what made the first game special — this very core, primal idea of unconditional love a parent has for their child. We didn't have a clean idea. It was just a bunch of plot points and twists."

*Italics added

The core of *The Last of Us Part II*'s story would be revealed in the opening minutes of the PSX 2016 panel.

"If the first game was really like the core of it, the

theme was about love between these two characters and how we build that through story, music, interaction, gameplay, mechanics. This story is the counter of that. This story is about hate—and how we use all those same things to make the player feel that through Ellie this time," Druckmann said.

Another interesting tidbit from the panel was in regard to the One Night Live event that Naughty Dog and Sony held back in 2014 before the launch of *The Last of Us Remastered*. Baker mentioned how it was nice for Johnson and himself to dip their toes back in the roles of Ellie and Joel in a non-canonical epilogue. Druckmann would chime in with a corrective "well…." For those that could not attend in person, fans immediately took to the Internet to share what the final, live-only scene was.

Naughty Dog was silent about *The Last of Us Part II* for the bulk of 2017, a noticeable trait considering the generation so far. It had to help having *The Lost Legacy* take the spotlight. The team considered putting something out at E3 2017 for *The Last of Us Part II*, but decided against it to avoid going through a grind so early in production. *The Last of Us Part II* would step back into the spotlight in October 2017 with a

gruesome cinematic, clearly reinforcing the violent world and hate-focused story.

Often dubbed the "Hanging Cinematic" or the "Hammer Scene," the trailer shown off at Paris Games Week 2017 is intense. It does not shy away from graphic violence. The entire scene is done in one shot or a "oner," giving the scene a flow and immersion. Both the scene and the game are intentionally designed to elicit a visceral reaction from the player while, in the larger scope of the story, provide a commentary on violent actions and their consequences.

Naughty Dog would once again close out the year with a PSX panel. The panel was much larger this year, with seven people from the game: Neil Druckmann, Halley Gross, Ashley Johnson, Troy Baker, Laura Bailey, Victoria Grace, and Ian Alexander. The panel revealed quite a bit about the development process. From the original cast returning to their roles to new actors and writers stepping into the beloved franchise for the first time, the discussion was insightful and entertaining. One moment that got a huge reaction from the audience was when Druckmann mentioned that after Gross' first day on

the job, in the context of the game's story, she had successfully "gotten someone pregnant." Neil also claimed the game was 50% to 60% done and confirmed that gameplay would be revealed at E3 2018, which would be Sony's last E3 for the generation, something we weren't aware of at the time.

Before the big annual press conference, Naughty Dog had some positive leadership promotions to share for a change. On March 9, 2018, President Evan Wells took to the company blog and announced that Druckmann was being promoted to Vice President of Naughty Dog. Druckmann would continue with *The Last of Us Part II* as the Creative Director. To fill the slot of Game Director for the upcoming title, Margenau and Anthony Newman were promoted together as co-directors. Emilia Schatz and Richard Cambier were announced as the Lead Designers on the game.

This wave of promotions made me think of Naughty Dog's leadership structure. The studio is relatively flat in terms of structure. If an artist needs to talk to a level designer, they have the ability to just go speak to the individual. People are mostly responsible for themselves. There are team leads and then

directors, but a key missing component was producers, at least, an average quantity of producers for a studio of its size.

"We don't have producers. We don't have a lot of process. So we really kind of rely on a lot of trust and lot of personal relationships," Newman said in a job pitch video to encourage people to apply for game design roles at the studio.

Naughty Dog has seemingly always had an aversion to producers. Wells talked about how producers slow progress, creating bottlenecks or hoops to jump through for the developers. Naughty Dog has always thrived off that "garage" developer feel, since the beginning. Despite its size, Naughty Dog has always kept a flat structure.

During a video interview with Andy McNamara of Game Informer in 2012, Wells and Balestra expressed their goal to keep that tightly woven feeling.

"Evan: 'It's something we think is very important to never let our size to, you know, inject too much bureaucracy or too much BS, you know, and try to cut through it. You know, keep things simple. Christophe

and I are still very actively involved with the development of the games and that's true across the board at all the levels - leads and directors - everyone's hands on…'

Christophe: 'It's getting harder and harder for us.'

Evan: 'It is. I mean, we got an amazing team, but I think by allowing everybody to do what got them into this industry in the first place, what their passionate about, and not just sort of burdening them with a ton of management responsibilities and sort of taking the joy out of their job, um, it allows us to keep that spark going.'"

Even after *Uncharted 4*'s brutal development cycle, Wells defended the studio's lack of producers.

"Producers become a crutch, where it's someone else's job to make that communication. We want people to get out of their chair and get the help they need immediately," Wells said in an interview with the LA Times.

There may be a shift in that culture though. During development on *The Last of Us Part II*, Druckmann

tweeted out praise for their producers. The studio definitely has them now, but presumably not as large of a team as other AAA developers: It is a "small, but mighty" team. People are expected to handle themselves. Schreier describes it in *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*:

"It was an unorthodox management style, which was something of a tradition at the studio behind *Uncharted*. Naughty Dog's staff liked to emphasize that, unlike other game studios, they didn't have producers. Nobody's job was simply to manage the schedule or coordinate people's work, the role a producer would fill at other companies. Instead, everyone at Naughty Dog was expected to manage him- or herself," Schreier wrote (Loc 816 in the digital copy *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*).

From what I can gather, it sounds like game designers almost fill this role of a producer to a certain degree. They are put in charge of specific levels and help shape them into existence. It makes sense with the studio's primary goal being to marry storytelling and gameplay. Emilia Schatz briefly describes it in the same game designer job pitch video from May 2015. While this video is essentially marketing for the

studio, I believe the designers speaking in it. It lines up with interviews I've read and the culture I sense from the team.

"At Naughty Dog, designers are sort of almost kind of at an assistant directorial position of like, 'I am in charge of this level and I need to be in contact with all the different departments and make sure that no one has anything that is holding them up,'" Schatz said.

Alongside this lack of numerous producers, which could be a factor that contributes to the studio's consistent crunch, job titles are more organically acquired, rather than assigned up front. Druckmann, Margenau, Newman, Schatz, and Cambier were all likely doing their new titles for months on end, before receiving an official title.

"Titles don't really matter. The way things work at Naughty Dog is like you do a responsibility for a while and people start organically working with you as if you have that title and then you get that title. It's not the other way around," Druckmann said during the Retro Replay retrospective on *The Last of Us*. "So you have to kinda prove, you have to earn it, before you get it. You don't need the title to get the respect

and to do the job. You just do that job and then you get the title."

Evolving Ellie

True to their word, the next reveal did take place at E3 on June 11, 2018. Sony's E3 showcase was a weird one. They only showed off four exclusive games—*The Last of Us Part II*, *Ghost of Tsushima*, *Death Stranding*, and *Marvel's Spider-Man*. Attendees moved from location-to-location, while the stream cut to a stage where PlayStation staff discussed and revealed smaller trailers. The show opened with *The Last of Us Part II,* though. The audience was inside a pop-up church mirroring what was to come in the demo, but first, series composer Gustavo Santaolalla would play a new song from the game.

The demo kicked off with a cutscene that takes place inside a church during a community dance with Ellie off to the side drinking. After getting dragged out onto the dance floor by her friend Dina, Ellie clearly becomes more shy and lacks confidence. The two share a kiss as the game uses a pan from behind to transition to Ellie slicing an enemy's throat in a forest. Then the gameplay begins.

The gameplay was strung with tension. Ellie can now crawl to lie low and she can jump on command.

The enemies she is fighting are the same foes from the "Hammer Scene" at Paris Game Week 2017, which is obvious thanks to their signature disembowelment technique. Combat is the same claustrophobic encounters from the first game with improvements to both player options and realism. Ellie can hide under cars, but her enemies can look under cars and drag her out. No place felt safe in the demo. The enemies each had their own names and called out specifically to one another. This is one new element that tries to humanize enemies while commenting on violence and its consequences: These characters have lives, friends, and families in this world, even if they are trying to kill you.

The gameplay portion ends with Ellie taking out four people inside a small shop. The player can now squeeze Ellie through tight spaces for quick flanks and to escape enemies in pursuit. Players may also craft explosive arrows. The gameplay ended with a bang, to say the least. The demo transitioned back to the dance for a final line and then it was over. Nearly two years after its announcement, the world finally saw the game in action. It was a clear evolution of the original gameplay, enhanced by the PS4 and new technologies to make the world more believable than ever before.

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Later in the week, an E3 Coliseum panel with Druckmann, Margenau, and Newman was held to discuss the demo. The panel offered an interesting look inside the thought process of the directors on the game.

Margenau talked about how the core philosophy for the game is, in a word, tension. As a sequel, the team wanted to tackle how to expand upon the solid foundation of the original game. They focused on how to connect Ellie to the environment, which ultimately connects the player to the space. By allowing Ellie to squeeze in tight spaces and lie down in tall grass, the world gains a more tangible feel.

The team also looked at how a person of Ellie's stature would handle themselves in close range melee combat. Players can now use a dodge in fights. With the ability to jump on command, combat areas are designed with verticality in mind. Even the stealth has evolved to be more analog: Factors like Ellie's stance and grass thickness play into how hidden the player is. On paper, it reminds me of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*'s take on stealth, which had a percentage that changed based on terrain and what camouflage you

equipped.

The enemy AI was also enhanced to lean into this grounded game world. Besides each enemy having their own name, they communicate via whistling. When spotted, the information on your location spreads out through their whistles. All the enemies in a space are not immediately locked in on your location. We would learn later that all characters even have a heartbeat, which impacts the rate of breathing and sound effects that characters produce. All of this is done for the sake of immersion and realism.

"Every kind of new element we add, like, we're really focused on having a lot of elegance; having few mechanics that deliver, like, a lot of options that really, like, increase the dimensionality of the gameplay space," Newman said during the panel.

Outside of the intricacies of the demo itself, Naughty Dog also had been tailoring its reveals to create an arc. Each reveal built upon the previous one, slowly revealing tiny bits of the game. Compared to *Uncharted*'s bombastic demos and reveals, this methodical approach of what to reveal and what not to reveal was different for Naughty Dog.

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Another stark difference from previous game announcements was the silence in regard to the game's release date.

"We've learned our lesson. We're not going to say the release date until we are very close to release. So, we're not very close to release is the only thing we'll say," Druckmann said when asked at the very end of the panel.

Release would be just over two years away from that statement, but unfortunately, the lesson didn't pan out in the end. I imagine the team was fueled with the excitement and energy generated by the demo, just like they were with *Uncharted 4*. It would propel them through the remainder of 2018 and into the new year.

After E3 2018, Naughty Dog was a tiny bit more open about the development process for the game. On December 21, 2018, Druckmann tweeted out about how they had shot the "most complicated and heart wrenching scene" that Naughty Dog had ever made. Even Johnson chimed in before the Christmas holiday to comment on how heavy the week's shoot was. Four months later, the team would shoot both the final

scene for the game and conclude shooting the cinematics.

For the bulk of 2019, major developments were not revealed. With Sony skipping E3 2019, it wouldn't be until September 24, 2019, that the proverbial "Tommy's dam of information" would burst. On that day, Sony aired a State of Play video where a new trailer closed out the show. Continuing the tailored arc for the reveals, the trailer picks up the day after Ellie and Dina dance and kiss. It showed off new gameplay and finally revealed Joel, who had not been seen since the original teaser, where no one even saw his face. The trailer closed with a release date of February 21, 2020.

Druckmann published a blog post both on the PlayStation Blog and on Naughty Dog's site detailing the game's various editions and a smidge about the game itself. *The Last of Us Part II* is the studio's most ambitious title ever, making it their longest and largest game to date. The game is so large that it may span two Blu-Ray discs, like *Red Dead Redemption II* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake*.

Two days later on September 26, the press shared

their previews for the three hour demo that they got to play while the State of Play was airing. Even PlayStation shared an "Inside the Demo" video for fans around the world to watch. Key takeaways from the new demo were new enemy types; both humans and Infected. Human enemies can now have dogs that follow Ellie's scent. New and improved Infected types were shown off, too. The new is the Shambler, which chases Ellie down and bursts a cloud of spores. The improved is a Stalker, which shows up as a mini-boss fight inside a garage.

A shocking reveal was the fact that the game would not include the Factions multiplayer mode from the first game. As press previews rolled out, the lack of a multiplayer mode was slowly confirmed. *The Last of Us Part II* would be the first Naughty Dog game in 11 years that would not include an online multiplayer mode. Later in the day, Naughty Dog tweeted out the following statement.

"We wanted to address multiplayer in *The Last of Us Part II*. As we've stated, the single-player campaign is far and away the most ambitious project Naughty Dog has ever undertaken. Likewise, as development began on the evolution of our Factions mode from *The Last of*

Us Part I, the vision of the team grew beyond an additional mode that could be included with our enormous single-player campaign. Wanting to support both visions, we made the difficult choice that *The Last of Us Part II* would not include an online mode.

However, you will eventually experience the fruits of our team's online ambition, but not as part of *The Last of Us Part II*. When and where it will be realized is still to be determined. But rest assured, we are as big a fan of Factions as the rest of our community and are excited to share more when it's ready."

*Italics added

Bruce Straley would even chime in via Twitter on the next day. Straley said he knows the ambition of both the single-player and multiplayer for *The Last of Us Part II* and the separation and delay for Factions would be worth the wait.

Naughty Dog themselves provided an inkling of what that ambition was in a multiplayer design pitch video they published in October 2017, well into the development of *The Last of Us Part II*.

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"What we don't want is multiplayer to feel like a mode. We want it to be almost its own game—its own experience. It might start with an idea world or an idea of a mechanic or, even more recently, a certain feeling that we're after. And then we will explore, okay, 'what kind of world can evoke that feeling? What kind of mechanics can evoke that feeling? What kind of psychological situations can we put multiple people in that speak back to the theme that we're after,'" Druckmann said.

When I hear them pursuing a certain feeling, it takes me back to the original Factions multiplayer when the game launched. The multiplayer excelled at creating tension. When thinking about Naughty Dog's driving force of connecting the player to a story and experience through the controller, it's easy and exciting to entertain all the possibilities.

It is interesting to think how the scope of Factions could have grown. Games are growing larger year by year. Not just Naughty Dog games either, so it is not surprising that *The Last of Us Part II* would be cut into two experiences to possibly avoid even more crunch to hit the February 2020 deadline and allow the team to, frankly, make more money by presumably selling

both games individually. In the end, *The Last of Us Part II* will have cost millions of dollars and working hours to create.

Unfortunately, Naughty Dog would not be able to keep their goal of sticking with the announced release date when the game was near completion. On October 24, 2019, one month after the release date announcement, Naughty Dog delayed *The Last of Us Part II* to May 29, 2020.

"…as we were closing out sections of the game, that we realized we simply didn't have enough time to bring the entire game up to a level of polish we would call Naughty Dog quality. At this point we were faced with two options: compromise parts of the game or get more time. We went with the latter, and this new release date allows us to finish everything to our level of satisfaction while also reducing stress on the team," Druckmann wrote in the blog post.

The delay allowed Naughty Dog to make the game they wanted to without having to cut corners. Jason Schreier reports that more crunch happens because of delays. In his story, which was spawned after the delay of *Cyberpunk 2077* and the *Avengers* game in

January 2020, Jason even mentions *The Last of Us Part II* citing Naughty Dog's "workaholic" tendencies. These tendencies would come to light in the coming months.

Coming into 2020, the excitement for *The Last of Us Part II* began mounting to new heights. In February, I ended up buying my first 4K TV, which unexpectedly brought my hype to the top. In earnest, it got the ball rolling on this whole piece. The original game would even win quite a few game of the decade awards as the 2010s came to a close.

As May 29 drew closer and closer, Naughty Dog and PlayStation wanted to give fans hands-on time with the game. They planned to attend PAX East 2020 in Boston and give fans an hour-long demo, the same snowy "Patrol" demo that the press played back in September. This would not come to pass though, as Sony made the decision to withdraw from PAX East due to safety concerns related to COVID-19. Naughty Dog did state that they would have more to show closer to the game's release.

The next chunk of news would seemingly come out of nowhere. On March 5, 2020, HBO announced that

Druckmann and Craig Manzin, the creator behind the network's *Chernobyl*, would be turning *The Last of Us* into a television series for HBO. This would replace the film announced nearly six years prior. It's not hard to imagine that having Gross and Shannon Woodward at Naughty Dog helped bring Druckmann, Manzin, and HBO together at a table, since they are both involved with successful HBO series. With the sequel on the horizon, there is even a chance the show could include narrative from it.

Almost a week later, Druckmann would announce that composer Gustavo Santaoalla would be doing the music for the show as well. Manzin briefly discussed when the show would ramp up production on his podcast Scriptnotes with John August. At the top of the episode that aired on March 10, Manzin mentioned how the story needed length that a movie could not provide, hence the decision to make it into a show. The production should kick off in earnest when *The Last of Us Part II* wraps its own production in April or May. I'd imagine that Druckmann would focus on the show and its efforts, while Naughty Dog pursues the multiplayer game revolving around Factions.

Endure and Survive

It wouldn't be a cornerstone AAA game release without the Jason Schreier article on the studio's crunch and *The Last of Us Part II* is no exception. On March 12, 2020, over two months before the game was scheduled to be released, Schreier published his crunch exposé on Kotaku. I recommend reading it.

To try and avoid crunch, Druckmann and the leads planned out as much of the game as early as possible. Narrative beats and features were planned out up front. But before the E3 2018 demo, Naughty Dog ran play tests. It was during this time that the studio realized that certain characters were not clicking with the audience; narrative beats weren't matching up. So Druckmann and the lead team began making changes and the scope of the game grew. It needed more time and space for the narrative to develop, and thus more game to tell the story on the stick. While this kind of revision is normal in game development, it adds months of work.

Schreier reports that by the end of 2018, nearly a year and a half before the game would release, most of Naughty Dog was in crunch mode. This doesn't mean

that Naughty Dog would be in sustained crunch for a year and a half, but it does provide a glimpse into the mindset of the studio. From the article, it sounds like bottlenecks in the pipeline played a factor. Whether waiting to get feedback from a lead or having more pressing work plopped onto the desk, it sounds like the studio struggled with how to juggle so many tasks and move forward at a reasonable pace.

Schreier goes on to talk about how Naughty Dog had lost 14 of the 20 non-lead designers from *Uncharted 4* since its release. The loss of talent had resulted in hiring less experienced employees, which had a much steeper learning curve to nail down the perfectionism that is a staple at the studio.

Even when the game was delayed from February to May, the crunch train did not slow down. Naughty Dog wanted to keep the pace. Schreier even reported that in mid-February Naughty Dog was able to persuade Sony to delay its production of the game discs by two weeks, giving the team even more time for polish and crunch.

The fallout after the article was an equally interesting time, filled with "subtweets" and Twitter

threads. I feel like chronicling the entire fallout would not be beneficial to the entirety of this piece, but I will pull a few choice examples.

The same day that Schreier published the article, former Naughty Dog animator Jonathan Cooper created a thread on Twitter. He started with a tweet to the article and said "So proud to be apart of this studio." Later in the day is when Cooper sent out his thread. I've decided to copy it below for you to read and for posterity.

"When I left Naughty Dog late last year they threatened to withhold my final paycheck until I signed additional paperwork stating I wouldn't share their production practices. They finally relented when I assured them that was most likely illegal...

The truth is I have no awful crunch tale. The "story animators" as we were known were averaging 46hrs a week when I left and I personally never went over 55. The story team is super organised [sic] and we reacted to whatever was thrown at us. That's not to say others weren't suffering. For the demo shown last September [2019], the gameplay animators crunched more than I've ever seen and required weeks of recovery

afterwards. One good friend of mine was hospitalised [sic] at that time due to overwork. He still had over half a year to go. There have been others since.

The reason I left is because I only want to work with the best. That is no longer Naughty Dog. Their reputation for crunch within LA is so bad it was near impossible to hire seasoned contract game animators to close out the project. As such we loaded up on film animators. While super-talented, they lacked the technical/design knowhow to assemble scenes. Similarly, the design team ballooned with juniors to make up for the attrition of key roles. Every aspect of finishing this game took much longer due to the lack of game experience on the team.

Don't get me wrong, these kids are mostly awesome and the best were great. It's just when the junior/senior ratio is out of balance things can really grind and more time is spent training than actually working. (LA teams, make sure and pick them up when all the contracts end.) Contract work is a huge part of the LA ecosystem to ship large games. Unlike game design, there is a thriving animation industry here and seasoned animators can (often) choose their projects. Most of the contract story animators quit last

year. Those that don't can be at ND for 2-3 projects (with pauses inbetwen) [sic] and, while paid overtime, never receive benefits or the security of a full-time gig. This is the way the industry is moving so workers need more protection rather than the carot [sic] of a fulltime job 'one day.'

There are ND stories worse than this but like everything on my twitter I'm focusing on animation. For TLOU2 fans, the game should turn out great with industry-leading animation. I would just not recommend anyone work at Naughty Dog until they prioritise [sic] talent-retention. Ultimately, ND's linear games have a formula and they focus-test the shit out of them. While talented, their success is due in large part to Sony's deep pockets funding delays rather than skill alone. A more senior team would have shipped TLOU2 a year ago."

Cooper's tweets drew lots of attention, particularly the comment on a more senior team being able to put out *The Last of Us Part II* a year sooner. This lent credence to Schreier's reporting about so many employees that worked on *Uncharted* 4 leaving since its release. Cooper had celebrated his five year anniversary at Naughty Dog just one year prior in

March 2019. He planned on staying as long as they let him continue to push the envelope in video game animation. Cooper left later that year.

Over the next two days, Druckmann made a couple of not-so-subtle, but positive tweets about the studio's animation team and the production team. Other Naughty Dog employees chimed in too, all seeming proud of their work and their team members. This is a part where chronicling the responses would be tedious and feeds into the "you had to be there" vibe this kind of social network dialog creates. Cooper even threw up some more tweets and the cycle continued.

To be frank, I've been writing this editorial since February 2020. Therefore, any developments on *The Last of Us Part II* after that time get incorporated where needed. Schreier's story on the crunch for this game is a prime example. Crunch is a very difficult thing to hear and read about: It must be a hundred times more so to experience it first-hand. I struggled with Schreier's article. I had really bought into the idea that the studio had mitigated their crunch this time around with the lessons I had read about from *Uncharted 4*. As a fan, I want the studio to succeed in making yet another marquee title for PlayStation. I also want the

people to have a healthy work-life balance.

I'm no producer. I struggled with balancing work and personal life for years during college when I was hired as a freelance guide writer for IGN. I so desperately wanted to make it there and would sacrifice time to make sure players knew how to collect in-game items in a timely manner pleasing to the SEO gods. I once lost a save file early in the evening and decided to drink a few cans of Red Bull to stay up through the night and re-capture and play the game so I could be back where I needed to be for the next day. I think most creative people crunch on some level. Schreier did for his first book. It can be a rush in smaller chunks. This is pebbles compared to creating a multi-million dollar video game over the course of years.

I also struggle with the fact it seems to be the developer's choice to work overtime and stay later due to a drive to make the game better. I believe some also feel peer pressure seeing other members staying late and them making a decision to leave work sooner. If that person is making that choice, then they will have to live with the consequences that fall out from it. Maybe someone needs to make the choice for the team

though. Maybe it is time for Naughty Dog to actively decide when to close the doors for the day and tackle the game tomorrow. Hopefully, as this generation comes to a close, Naughty Dog can use the PS5 and their next project to create a fresh slate for a healthier creative environment, one that helps employees balance their job and personal life, while creating personally satisfying projects that build upon Naughty Dog's legacy.

Unfortunately, the reach and impact of COVID-19 went much further than PAX East. On April 2, 2020, Sony announced that *The Last of Us Part II* would be delayed indefinitely. Citing logistics, such as printing discs and shipping them, Sony made the call to postpone the release so that the game could launch physically and digitally simultaneously. Naughty Dog published their own statement as well.

From both Naughty Dog's statement and additional reporting from Schreier, it does sound like the studio was on track for the May 29 release date, despite having to work from home to practice physical distancing due to COVID-19. Sony did release new screenshots shortly after the announcement, but then removed them in the evening. News sites put them up

before they vanished though. They significantly showed off Joel, who had been in limited coverage before.

The following day on April 3, Druckmann made an appearance on the PlayStation Blogcast for a brief chat with Sid Shuman. Druckmann shared insight behind the studio's reasons not to release a demo and how the team was adapting to working from home. Not even a week later, Sony actually removed the game from the PlayStation Store and began refunding customers their pre-orders.

It wouldn't be long until leaks began to happen for the game now that it was stuck in limbo. The night after the indefinite delay, a few small clips leaked online, most notably revealing a small, but unique looking gameplay mechanic. Weeks later on the weekend of April 25, a "huge chunk of unseen gameplay, various cut-scenes, the release's main menu, and what appears to be unfinished multiplayer code" leaked online. While I did watch the first leak, I stayed away from the second leak with a thirty-nine and a half foot pole.

The morning of April 27 is when the massive leak

became widely discussed. Rumors surrounding the cause of the second leak claimed the source was a former employee upset over a payment dispute. This would be proven false by the end of the week. Naughty Dog would make a statement in regard to the leak later in the day.

"We know the last few days have been incredibly difficult for you. We feel the same. It's disappointing to see the release and sharing of pre-release footage from development. Do your best to avoid spoilers and we ask that you don't spoil it for others.

The Last of Us Part II will be in your hands soon. No matter what you see and hear, the final experience will be worth it."

That same day, Sony would announce that June 19, 2020, would be the new release date for *The Last of Us Part II*. We may never know if the announcement came sooner than planned due to the leak the previous weekend. Three weeks was not as long as I expected the indefinite delay to last, but having the game sooner was a bright spot on an otherwise cloudy day.

On May 1, Sony would confirm to

GamesIndustry.biz that the leak did not originate from either company. The source of the leak would, obviously, not be identified due to an investigation. Just two days later, Schreier would share what he knew about the cause of the leak. According to a couple of Naughty Dog employees with direct knowledge of the event, the leak came about due to a security vulnerability in an older game's patch that allowed hackers access to Naughty Dog's servers. This breach could have happened much earlier in April, since the smaller leak happened around then, but there is no telling when it actually occurred. The damage was already done.

The Last of Us Part II went gold on May 4, 2020, which means that the game is complete and ready to be printed onto a disc. Druckmann recorded a video that was shared on the official Naughty Dog Instagram account with comments disabled, likely to avoid rampant spoilers polluting the post. Druckmann was emotional throughout the video. Going gold is often a key moment in development that is celebrated throughout the entire studio, but because the staff was still working from home due to COVID-19, the team was apart on the momentous day.

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"The last thing I will say is no matter what you have seen or heard or read, nothing compares to playing this thing from beginning to end. It's a video game, you got to play it," Druckmann said in the video. Even in the aftermath of the leak with all the reductive, half-baked summaries and the click-bait outrage videos, context to the story is crucial to remember. The backbone of the stories Naughty Dog tells is the power of the medium in which they tell them—video games. The best way to experience the story is the way it was intended.

Throughout May, the promotional campaign kicked into high gear. Sony began publishing a series of "Inside the …" videos that explored different elements of *The Last of Us Part II* including story and gameplay. The footage of the developers was clearly recorded before working from home was required for Naughty Dog and the gameplay footage was recycled from older demos. Sony also revealed an exclusive PS4 Pro console that was embossed with Ellie's moth tattoo. The limited edition system would launch the same day as the game. I may or may not have pre-ordered one.

On May 26, the press would announce that reviews

for *The Last of Us Part II* would drop on June 12, 2020 at midnight, one week before the release date.

The peak of pre-release promos would be the 23 minute State of Play dedicated to *The Last of Us Part II* that aired on May 27, 2020. What would have normally been a day of press previews, videos, and podcasts was distilled down to a video narrated by Druckmann. The presentation gave a taste of the scope of Seattle and displayed the refinement Naughty Dog has been able to achieve after so many years of development and iteration. It ended with nearly 10 minutes of uncut, never-before-seen gameplay.

The demo also confirmed that Vita still means life in the year 2038.

The Last of Us Part II appears to be the culmination of years of evolution and the pursuit of excellence. Naughty Dog has pushed their design language wider and wider while keeping an obsessive eye on the little details. The game that is being released on June 19, 2020, is not the game that would have come out two or three years after the original game, if the studio was able to keep two teams intact. This game stands on the shoulders of all the Naughty Dog PS4 titles before it,

taking their lessons and experimentations to craft this long-awaited sequel. It is not a product of picking an idea after wrapping the *Uncharted* series, but a product of patience, dedication, and a willingness to learn and grow. It is also a game built on the backs of extremely hardworking developers, animators, producers, artists, and many, many more creators. All of Naughty Dog was unified under the goal of marrying the story and the gameplay.

I don't know if it is going to be a good game. No one does yet. I can see though just how hard and how dedicated the team is to making a game they are proud of. I admire that.

Part VI: Conclusion

The Next Generation

"Games have all the complexities of film and television narrative, but on top of that, they have this added layer, this beautiful challenge but also bonus of integrating gameplay, and thinking about the person's experience in the moment-to-moment that's unlike anything else and the best puzzle in the world to solve every day." - Halley Gross

So what's next for Naughty Dog? What have they learned over the course of the PS4 generation? I can't speak directly for Naughty Dog: They never replied to my requests to talk or comment. After looking at their recent history, I feel like I can make some observations though.

The easiest answer is their next project: It's whatever the Factions multiplayer evolved into during development on *The Last of Us Part II*. The shape that game will take is still shrouded in mystery, but the foundation of it is familiar and solid. Some have even inferred features from job postings over the years. Even as of this writing, Naughty Dog is looking for multiplayer gameplay and online systems programmers.

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What platform will it launch for? I have no idea. It could launch at the very end of the PS4's life in the Holiday 2020 season. It could be a PS5 launch window title. It could be a cross-generational game. It's not a dissimilar situation to when the studio was co-developing a PS3 and a PS4 game at the start of this generation. While fun, it doesn't make too much sense to guess where this multiplayer game will actually be playable.

I have no doubts that it will be revealed this year, though. Naughty Dog has not had a publicly unannounced game or project since *The Last of Us* was revealed in 2011. Granted, one could take their statement about Factions not being in *The Last of Us Part II* but coming at a later time as an announcement. I suspect they will officially reveal it in some capacity this year. Work has presumably been done on it during the past four years, which could mean there is a shorter turn around until release in the public eye.

The real interesting question is what their follow-up project will be. This multiplayer game gives them time. Will their first PS5 game be another entry in an established IP or will Naughty Dog make their first original IP in nearly a decade? I think a part of that

depends on how *The Last of Us Part II* plays out, but I do think Naughty Dog will tackle a new IP for the new console: A clean slate, as it were.

The PS5 also seems to be providing an opportunity to change the design of games as well. Developers seemed super positive after the March *Road to PS5* talk from Mark Cerny, detailing the technical specs and Mark's vision for the next PlayStation. The SSD, in particular, seems to allow for a potentially radical shift in design with such instantaneous loading.

"The SSD in the PS5 (and all the associated IO hardware) is going to fundamentally change how we design videogames by removing limitations we've been working around the last two gens," Newman tweeted out following the talk.

The talk surrounding the PS5 is electrifying. It's that new console buzz that wires every discussion. While the hardware has exciting potential, I find it equally exciting to think about what Naughty Dog is going to bring to the table. In Mark Cerny's talk, he discussed balancing revolution and evolution when designing the next generation of hardware. We can apply those same principles to Naughty Dog's game

development.

Naughty Dog has taken each new PlayStation generation as a chance to push themselves and the industry forward with new, exciting IP. From *Crash* on the PlayStation, *Jak and Daxter* on the PS2, and *Uncharted* and *The Last of Us* on the PS3, Naughty Dog has consistently put out four games and new IP on each console generation since 1996.

The PS3 was a time of revolution for the studio. The *Uncharted* series took the team from cartoon platformers into a more realistic, action adventure genre. *Uncharted 2* elevated the studio in the eyes of millions from "the guys that made *Crash*" to a studio that made the definitive 2009 Game of the Year. Then they made *The Last of Us*, which fundamentally changed the studio and raised the bar for the video game industry. Naughty Dog kept pushing the revolution envelope with the PS3.

During the PS4 generation, Naughty Dog went down the path of evolution. The franchises they made games for were incredibly well-established and beloved. It was a time for honing their technique. Their eye for detail became sharper, laser focused on

making their worlds tangible. Storytelling matured alongside their gameplay design as the two became intrinsically intertwined.

What will the PS5 symbolize for Naughty Dog? We'll have to wait and see. I can imagine another period of revolution, while using their new skills they evolved and honed during the PS4 to push themselves into bold, new direction.

Staying within *Uncharted* and *The Last of Us* allowed Naughty Dog to evolve as a studio. On paper, that sounds like the easier path; far easier to market and design for two well-established series than coming up with a completely new IP. I think the decision to evolve their technique and style with beloved franchises was wise. Naughty Dog has been able to elevate their games.

Uncharted 4 humanized Nathan in ways they never had on the PS3. They also pushed the pulp action adventure to new gameplay heights with a fluidity impossible on previous hardware. Wide-linearity gave players more choice and put more of the story in the palms of people's hands, instead of on their screen. Despite giving the player more choice in how to play,

Naughty Dog has told the stories they want to tell. With a clear narrative vision, the team was able to focus on how to elicit empathy through gameplay.

The Last of Us changed the future of the studio. It put them on the path they took during the PS4. Druckmann's idea from 2004 at Carnegie Mellon University turned into a game that would change the future of Naughty Dog. As the sequel gets ready to close down Naughty Dog's journey on the PS4, it remains clear that the team will continue to pursue single-player narrative driven games. The technology may change, the game worlds may get larger and more intricate, the platforms may evolve, but Naughty Dog is firmly rooted in their goal. They want to tell stories that make players connect on an emotional level in the best medium for that goal. The interactivity of games brings people into the stories on a subconscious level. Naughty Dog is in constant pursuit of enriching and strengthening that connection.

Throughout the PS4 generation, Naughty Dog has also attempted to mitigate their notorious crunch. The balance of planning ahead and sticking to that plan is thrown off from actively learning what works in a

game during the course of production and a seemingly endless flood of ideas and inspirations. It has been an undeniably successful console cycle for the studio, but the long-term sustainability has been a question welling up with each subsequent release. From the frantic, rough development of *Uncharted 4* to the generation-long process of creating a sequel to their most successful game, crunch has been woven into the DNA of each game. It is an important element to remember.

With the PS5 on the horizon, the studio's future seems bright. The infectious excitement of new hardware has caught onto the possibilities for the future games Naughty Dog will make. It is a hopeful time that some sort of balance with crunch can be achieved. It is an encouraging time to see so much hard work and sacrifice pay off; both critically and commercially. They appear stronger than ever. They are making unparalleled games. They are industry leaders.

They are Naughty Dog.

They will never stop chasing the stick.

Epilogue

I want to thank my wife Abby for supporting and dealing with me while I've been consumed by this story. From the early mornings of writing to the hours of replaying Naughty Dog's games, she never stopped supporting me. This story, let alone this website, would not exist without her unwavering support. You have endlessly encouraged me to chase after my own "stick." Thank you Abby, this means more to me than you'll ever know. I love you.

I want to thank my friend Logan Moore for helping edit this story and putting up with my incessant thoughts and comments about Naughty Dog these past four months. Really, he's been putting up with that for the whole PS4 generation. Logan made this story better than I ever could have alone. Thank you.

Thank you to Michael Ruiz, Mario Rivera, Kevin Hein, Colin Moriarty, Greg Miller, Jason Schreier, Federico Viticci, Stephen Hackett, and Myke Hurley for being a fountain of inspiration and motivation.

Thank you Neil and Bruce for everything that you both have done.

I want to thank Naughty Dog. Every single team

member that has worked there at any point, especially during this last decade where this entire history takes place. You all have helped shaped the worlds that I love to experience the most. Your work, both on and off the screen, does not go unnoticed. Keep chasing the stick.

And thank you, for reading this whole thing. It is the largest, most-researched story I have ever written. It means the world that you would take the time to read it. Thank you.

Sic Parvis Magna

Endure and survive