

A beautiful wasteland for 'The Last of Us'

June 7 2013, by Derrik J. Lang



This video game image released by Sony/Naughty Dog shows a scene from "The Last of Us," a flesh-eating survival drama set for release Friday, June 7, 2013 for the PlayStation 3. (AP Photo/Sony/Naughty Dog)

It's just after lunch. Naughty Dog has recently completed work on its latest video game, and the developer's dimly lit office space in Santa Monica is less populated than usual. The quiet is so eerie that it feels like at any moment a zombie could surprisingly spring up from one of the dozens of empty cubicles or lunge out from behind a trophy case.

Fittingly, the game they recently finished is "The Last of Us," a post-apocalyptic, flesh-eating survival drama set for release next Friday for

the [PlayStation 3](#). With fewer shoot-'em-up skirmishes and absolutely no treasures to hunt, "Last of Us" is something of a departure for the studio best known for the slick globe-trotting action-adventure series "Uncharted."

The collision of emotional storytelling and groundbreaking visuals in "Last of Us" is also further proof that video games can be just as contemplative as other art forms when developers truly desire and work toward it.

"Last of Us" is set 20 years after an epidemic based on a real-world parasitic fungus has transformed scads of humans into a ravenous horde known as "the infected." "The game thoughtfully depicts the ruins of Boston, Pittsburgh and other eastern U.S. locales after the world has been plunged into chaos and mother nature begun reclaiming the environment.

The developers have fashioned an electricity-free, sun-kissed rendition of [Armageddon](#). It's as lovely as it is deadly. Weeds wildly prosper on once busy city streets. Inside crumbling buildings, vegetation rises through cracks in the floor where natural light sneaks in from fractured walls and ceilings. At night, only the moon and your flashlight illuminate the path ahead.



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"Usually, what you see with survival games is that they're very bleak and serious or they're only about the monsters and the science behind everything," said creative director Neil Druckmann. "Yes, we based the story on something that's grounded in reality, but it's not even about that. It's really about the interesting contrasts that exist within this world."

"Last of Us" tells the story of Joel, a gruff outlaw tasked with escorting a mysterious 14-year-old girl named Ellie past collapsed skyscrapers, across flooded streets and through abandoned buildings. The game's designers and artists toiled away for three years to make the hauntingly beautiful world of "Last of Us" as nuanced as the relationship between Joel and Ellie.

Beyond dialogue and notes scattered across the landscape, the developers employed what they call "environmental storytelling" to subtly recount

what happened as society collapsed, whether it's how a house was barricaded to show how the family inside endured, or what a bookstore looks like when it's used as a makeshift processing center for survivors.

With less action than typical games, "Last of Us" gently invites players to explore all the devastation. The virtual settings in the game are littered with little detailed vignettes of humanity: children's drawings untouched on cubicle walls in offices, ceramic gnomes unknowingly smiling in overgrown gardens, family photos still displayed in wrecked living rooms.

"In every nook and cranny, we tried to include the human element," said art director Erik Pangilinan. "For instance, at one point, you travel through an apartment building, but we didn't want each space to look like something from HGTV. That's not how people really live. We asked ourselves: What is the ethnicity of the person who lived here? What do they like?"

In one abandoned town depicted in "Last of Us," there's a record store. Inside, there are rows of albums with covers based on real-world records that were all created from scratch by the game's artists. It's not a place that's vital to the main storyline. There's not even a motivating reason for players to go inside. They could walk right by it. It's just there. It exists.

"The direction many times for the artists was to not be afraid of being mundane," said game director Bruce Straley. "As creators, we all want to show off. The biggest challenge for this game aesthetically was grounding things and keeping them simple. Sometimes a post office is just a post office. If every roof is caved in, then no roofs are caved in."

"Last of Us" has already received glowing reviews this week from game critics. Brett Molina of USA Today called it "an incredible journey that delivers a strong, satisfying story with a jaw-dropping visual

presentation," while Tom Hoggins of The Telegraph deemed "Last of Us" as "Naughty Dog's finest work and one of the best games of this generation."

More information: www.thelastofus.com

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