

Meet The Jewish Dad Behind 'The Last of Us'

By [Lior Zaltzman](#) Feb 10, 2023



via Jeff Kravitz/FilmMagic for HBO

The new HBO hit show “The Last Of Us” follows smuggler Joel (Pedro Pascal) and his teen charge, Ellie (Bella Ramsey), as they journey through a post-apocalyptic universe invaded by spore-infected zombies — a world of military checkpoints, insurrectionists, curfews and, at times, senseless violence.

That fictionalized setting is loosely inspired by the early childhood years of the creator of the 2013 game the show is based on: Neil Druckmann. The Jewish creator, 44 — who is also a co-creator of the show — was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, but spent the first decade of his childhood in a West Bank settlement. That reality especially inspired the second video game installment, “The Last of Us: Part II” — which will hopefully serve as source material for future seasons.

“I grew up in a culture that is constantly in a conversation about the cycle of violence,” Druckmann said on the [Script Apart](#) podcast in 2021. “When you’re growing up and... you see one side of the conflict, you see it in very simple terms, and as you get older you realize there’s many more nuances to the conversation... The people outside of it that aren’t living in it view it very simply, and then the more you research, you understand the complexity of it.”

When he was working on the second game, Druckmann wanted to construct that experience: going on a journey, thinking that reality is black and white, villain and good guy, and then slowly peeling back the curtain. This concept is at the heart of both games and, also, the show — that good and evil are in the eye of the beholder, that morality in this world of fraught survival is complex and subjective.

“The Last of Us” is also an ode to Druckmann’s new home, America, where his family moved to when he was 10. The story explores the ruins of a virus-ravaged U.S. and are full of Americana.

"I have a certain affinity and certain love for the United States that's in some way unique to an immigrant," he told [GQ in 2020](#). "I remember the first time we arrived, a couple of days later we drove through Manhattan. And I'm like, 'Oh, my God, I'm in one of the many movies I've seen that have taken place on this street!'"

Ellie, whose character is at the heart of both "The Last of Us" games, came to Druckmann while he was working [on a pitch for a game competition](#) during his masters at Carnegie Mellon. "I'd developed this pitch about a cop protecting this girl," Druckmann said. "She lost her dad. He lost his kid." Sounds familiar?

Druckmann may not have won that contest, but the idea for Ellie was born. Her name came to him as he was trying to name his firstborn daughter, while he was working on developing "The Last of Us" – at the end of the day, he decided to use it for another, fictional baby.

It was also while he was a student at Carnegie Mellon that Druckmann started working at Naughty Dog, the gaming studio which developed "The Last of Us," of which he is now co-president.

Naughty Dog actually has a pretty Jewish origin story: It was funded by two friends who met in 1982 at Hebrew school, Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin. Before it became known for "The Last of Us," and the amazing "Uncharted" franchise, it was celebrated for delightful games like "Jax and Baxter" and "Crash Bandicoot" – games that definitely made my childhood.

When it was released in 2013, "The Last Of Us" didn't fit the mold of the traditional video games of my childhood. One of its main characters was not only female – still a rarity – but also a female character obviously not made for the male gaze. It was also diverse in more than gender, featuring queer characters and characters of color. For me, a girl who grew up playing video games and feeling a little unwelcome in that world, playing the game was a revelation.

As a longtime lover of narrative video games, I feel so vindicated that "The Last of Us" has been turned into a hit TV series. Druckmann banded with [Craig Mazin](#), a fellow Jewish dad and explorer of apocalyptic landscapes (he's known for the beyond-excellent HBO miniseries "Chernobyl") to create a show which both reverently and sometimes literally channels the games (I was definitely getting some gameplay flashbacks!), while also veering enough from the material of origin to surprise and delight veteran games.

While both Joel and Ellie have Jewish (or Jew-ish!) names, those hoping for Jewish content in the show may be disappointed, at least for now. It's only in the second game that Druckmann gave a very explicit nod to his Jewish roots with [the character of Dina](#). Dina not only has a hamsa bracelet, but also, in one of the game scenes, she recognizes that a building she and Ellie have entered is a synagogue.

Dina then talks about her Jewish faith, about prayer and Torah scrolls, but also about the comfort she finds in coming from people who are survivors – from the Spanish Inquisition to the Holocaust. It's an especially poignant framing in a game that is all about fighting for survival.

More than anything, "The Last of Us" centers on fatherhood and the distance that a father will go for for his daughter – whether biological or adopted through circumstances. These ideas of found family and the sacrifices we make for the people we love make the game, and consequently the show, so powerful. As so many viewers are discovering, it really hits you in the feels.

"At its core is the soul of it, the unconditional love a parent feels for their child," Druckmann told Vanity Fair ahead of the show's premiere.

He [was inspired](#) both by the sacrifices that his own parents made for him and by his initiation into fatherhood. Druckmann was just becoming a father when he worked on the game, and his firstborn was a great influence on it, in big and small ways. He was thinking about making a worthy role model for his

daughter when he made the game, hoping to create “the coolest non-sexualized female videogame protagonist.”

But he also snuck little details into the game as an ode to her. For example, in the game, we see Sarah — Joel’s biological daughter — wearing a tour shirt of a fictional band named “Halican Drops.” The band’s tour on the shirt, enterprising fans have discovered, follows Joel and Ellie’s journey through post-apocalyptic America almost step by step. But the name of the band actually came from Druckmann’s toddler daughter — it was the name of her favorite doll.

In the show, Sarah, played by Nico Parker, also wears a Halican Drops shirt, and the wardrobe department gave Druckmann, who directed the second episode of the show, a replica of the shirt for his now-teenaged daughter. “It’s one her most prized possessions,” he recounted on Instagram.



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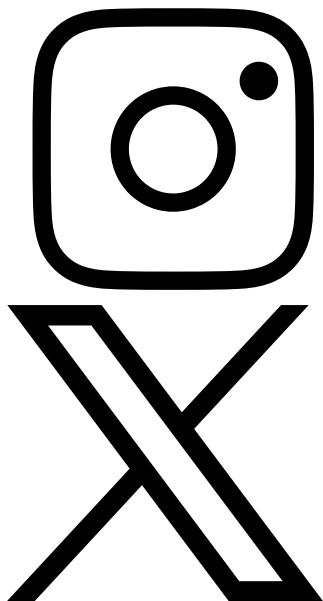
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