

What Telltale's Best Games and Stephen King Have in Common

By Phil Hornshaw
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Everything in pop culture builds off what came before, but sometimes it's not so obvious exactly what inspired your favorite video games. Luckily game recognize game, and Source Code is where Playboy explores games' eclectic origins and finds out what influences video game developers.

Telltale Games has landed on a formula that works: it is licensing franchises to create video games with deep, branching stories that are driven by player choices. The breakout game for Telltale, the one that really solidified it as a studio doing exciting things with game storytelling, was *The Walking Dead*, based on Robert Kirkman's comic books of the same name (and not the AMC television show adapted from them). But that was until *Tales from the Borderlands* came along.

Tales is effectively a side story in the *Borderlands* franchise, a series of shooter games created by developer Gearbox Software. Where *Borderlands* is about constantly finding newer, better guns with which to shoot bad guys, *Tales* plumbs the games' goofy, humorous setting and characters to create a game of a completely different nature. In it, a corporate lackey and a con artist team up with an entourage of other characters in hopes of claiming the contents of a Vault, an alien cache that will make them fabulously rich—and hopefully save their lives from the gangsters and middle managers who mean to kill them.

Looking at the Telltale catalogue, *Tales* might be the best thing the studio has yet done. But it's even better analyzed through a different filter: that of *The Walking Dead*, a game that might be considered, in many ways, a tragic spiritual sibling to its comic counterpart. The titles are Telltale's exploration of similar stories in two very different ways.

First, though, let me tell you a story about Stephen King.

THE DARK HALF



In the late 1970s and early 1980s, author Stephen King began writing under a pseudonym: Richard Bachman.

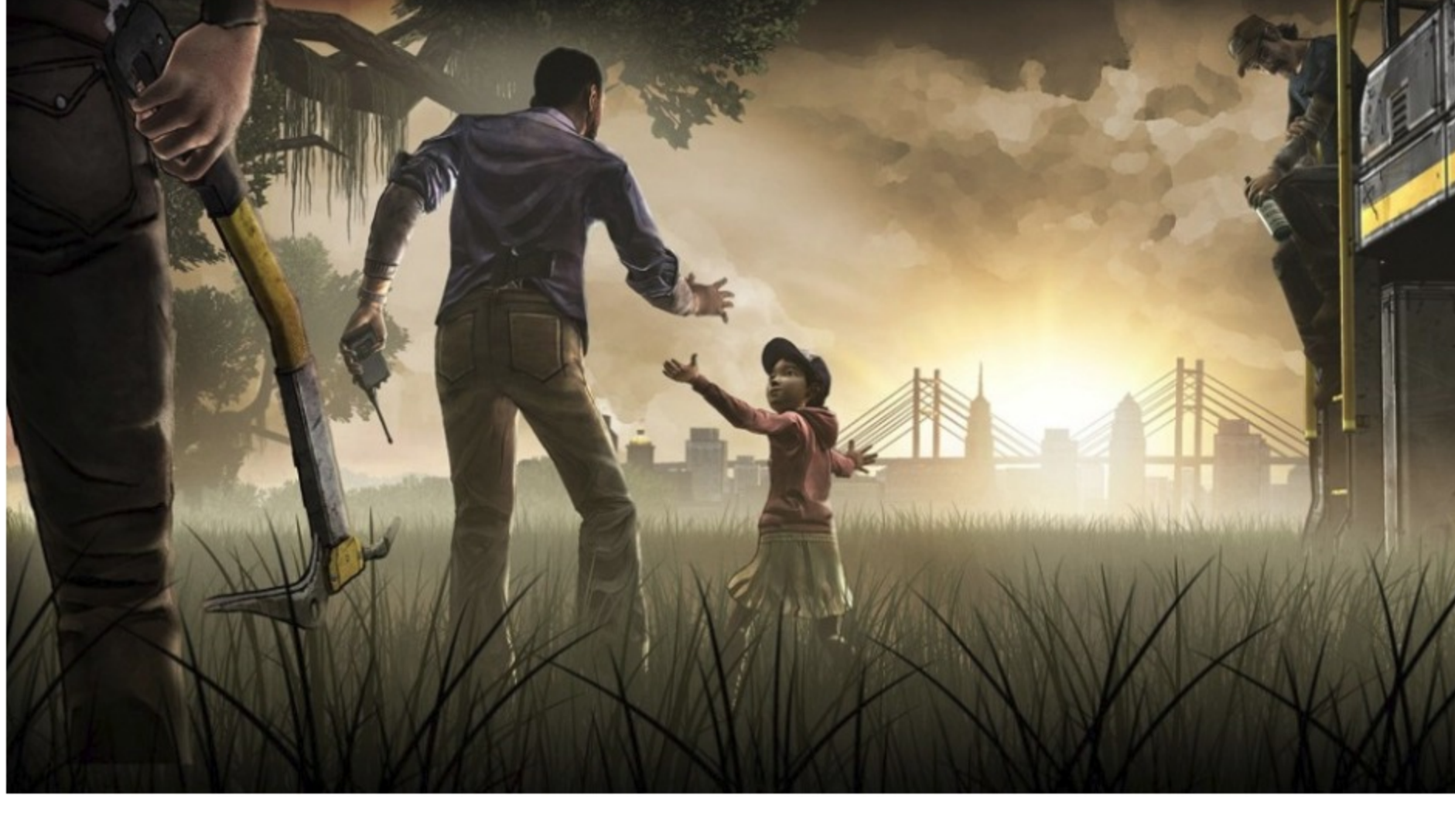
The pseudonym quickly began to denote something of a darker version of King. In many, maybe most, of King's novels, dire circumstances and horrific deaths eventually culminate in somewhat happy endings, but the Bachman stories are often bleaker. Bachman "died" when his true identity was outed in 1985, but in 1996 the novel *The Regulators* was released with Bachman's name on the cover. That same year came *Desperation*, a novel bearing King's name.

Desperation follows several people who are stopped and arrested by a sheriff on a lonely desert highway. An ancient demon, released from a nearby mine, has possessed the man and is having fun by targeting and trapping vulnerable people in the middle of nowhere. *The Regulators* also features the same ancient demon from the same mine, but in a completely different setting: the middle American suburbs. One day, the place comes under siege by the demon and his phenomenal, reality-bending power, as channeled through the mind of a possessed, TV-watching child. The neighborhood and its inhabitants are quickly imprisoned and terrorized by the murderous, mad will of the demon.

The characters living in the suburbs all bear the same names and some of the same traits as those who appear in *Desperation*; the novels are almost remixes of one another, or like two stage plays put on by the same theater company.

Like the works of Bachman and King, *The Walking Dead* and *Tales from the Borderlands* share much of the same creative brain trust at Telltale. Like *Desperation* and *The Regulators*, they're two very different takes on the same basic idea.

ROAD TRIPS WITH DIFFERENT DESTINATIONS



The Walking Dead, like many zombie stories, is about people struggling together with their society ripped away. It sees a group of survivors band together as they try to carve out safe spaces against the undead, and conflicts arise as desires, needs and personalities clash along the way. The biggest threats aren't marauding zombies, though—they're other humans, both within the group and without, who are adapting to a world without rules.

Tales from the Borderlands is a lot like that. Pandora, the *Borderlands* setting that *Tales* borrows, is basically an outlaw planet modeled after the Wild West. For every settlement built on some semblance of order, there are many more bandit camps operating on a kill-or-be-killed power hierarchy. There's barely any law to speak of, and you're as likely to make it to the store for some milk as get maulled by an alien creature along the way.

The fundamental differences between *The Walking Dead* and *Tales from the Borderlands* are tonal. TWD is a horror-tragedy, a story of the slow unraveling of people faced with desperate situations as they cling to their humanity and the world they've lost and will never ever get back. *Tales* is a comedy of not-quite-nice folks living in the same kind of lawless, dangerous environment, making their livings by climbing over people on lower rungs of the metaphorical ladder—whether it be in a corporation built on taking advantage of the lawlessness or grifters conning the denizens of Pandora to scrape by.



In both games players interact with ever-changing groups of characters. Some enter the picture and then leave on their own; others die. Bonds are formed and broken by the stresses of the situation. Long-lasting, undying friendships are created. Characters go from selfish to selfless and vice versa. Both games explore relationships under extraordinary circumstances as players craft how those relationships play out through their choices. They both ask players how they will respond to betrayals and friendships: to desperation, fear and triumph. And both eventually are about the best things in ourselves: our capacity to love, and help, one another.

The Walking Dead is the Bachman book to *Tales*'s King story. One goes the bleak route, the other winds up on a happy note. But both look at the same ideas—the relationships of characters under stress, traveling in search of safety, finding friendship among the chaos—from two different points of view.

BETTER TOGETHER



Telltale's games are about choices, and the way those choices can influence stories as they're unfolding—or if we want to drill down even further, the way moment-to-moment choices influence the relationships of the people around us. The story is the vehicle through which we understand the relationships of the characters; the choices ask us to live within those relationships, at least in snapshots, and to shape them as they grow and change.

Telltale's games let you alter the story through your choices, and *The Walking Dead* and *Tales from the Borderlands* alter the story through which tone you choose to play. The first choice you make—which game to boot up—decides what kind of story you'll see from the outset.

Play *The Walking Dead* and *Tales from the Borderlands*, and you get two Telltale angles on the same idea, and each can add to the other. They show how the same systems and underlying themes can lend themselves to very different worlds and stories. And like the works of King and Bachman, playing TWD and *Tales* in tandem can help illuminate hidden aspects of both games, and what makes them so powerful.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of *So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel and The Space Hero's Guide to Glory*. He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

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