

Game Writing in the front: the blockbuster art of Richard Dansky porting Tom Clancy's books to Ubisoft's video games.

Roger Tavares

Richard Dansky



É um dos game writers responsáveis por trazer os famosos livros de ação de Tom Clancy para o universo dos videogames, títulos de muito sucesso publicados no mundo todo pela Ubisoft.

In this interview I wanted to explore the unfamiliar profession of game writer, specially those involved with conversions from other media to video games. In these sense, the broad knowledge of Richard Dansky in literature and tabletop RPG's, until your experience porting the Tom Clancy's books to blockbusters Ubisoft's video games, are invaluable resources for this kind of research.

I hope this interview can help all the researchers and professionals interested in video games writing, and put some light in this so interesting area of knowledge. I would like to thankful Richard for your priceless collaboration. It is very difficult can answer these kind of questions when working with this huge intellectual properties and companies, you are not allowed to tell some important things. But, the words are Richard's domain, and he makes very well. I need to thankful to the game student and Gamecultura's collaborator Bianca Gelli, and the friend Igor Antunes, a great specialist in Tom Clancy's books and video games.

About Richard Dansky

Hello Richard! It's a pleasure to be talking to you. Before we start, we would like to know a little bit about you:

I'm 38 years old, born in Brooklyn, New York. I currently live in Durham, North Carolina, and I've been in the video game business for ten years. My academic background is a bit unusual for games – I've got a BA and a MA in Literature, but I've also got four years' experience designing tabletop RPGs. As for the titles I've helped develop, I've worked on games in the Splinter Cell, Ghost Recon, Rainbow Six, Blazing Angels, and Might and Magic franchises, among others. Ubisoft keeps me busy J

When you look at yourself in the mirror, which character from Tom Clancy's works do you see? (Please, cite the game in which this character appears)

I have to go with Dr. Saul Pellow, from the original Rainbow Six novel. He's tied in with Temple University, which is in Philadelphia, where I grew up. So that connection's there, at the very least.

Do you participate actively in player communities, forums and online matches? Can you cite them?

I do a fair bit of lurking in various communities, but I don't participate much. It's more interesting to me to hear what folks are saying - you learn a lot that way, even if you do run across the occasional bit of hyperbole (or creative spelling :-)

Which ones are your favorite games and why?

I'm still a sucker for old-school classic *Ghost Recon* on the PC. For all that it seems like a fairly straightforward game - move through the space, take out your enemies - there's such a richness to the tactical puzzles that each level represents, and so much tension with each decision you make, that I always get a huge kick out of playing it.

As for other games I enjoy playing, anything by Tim Schafer always jumps to the top of my list. I've always admired his ability to integrate absolutely wild ideas and top-notch storytelling, and integrate it with enjoyable gameplay. So when *Brutal Legend* comes out, I'm probably going to drop off the face of the earth until I finish it :-). As for other games, I've got very eclectic tastes - everything from *Rock Band* to *Crackdown* to *Left 4 Dead*. And when I think nobody's looking, I pull out my PS2 and *Dynasty Warriors V*, and spend some quality time as Lu Bu. Just don't tell anybody :-)

Note: Tim Schafer is the renowned game designer of classic titles as *Maniac Mansion*, *The Secret of Monkey Island*, *Full Throttle* and *Grim Fandango* among others. *Brutal Legend* is your next game since *Psychonauts* (2005).

1. Technologies

PC or console? Where does your scripts get more interesting?

I think as consoles get more powerful, there's less and less differentiation in terms of the sorts of scripts you're writing for games these days. In a lot of cases, there's much wider variation between various game genres than there is between platforms. You can do wonderfully detailed and rich writing on a console – just look at *Mass Effect*, for one example – or do a PC game where the focus of the game isn't on the narrative at all.

Rainbow Six was one of the best-sellers of Tom Clancy's work. The release of his first game, back in 1998, practically introduced the genre "tactical-shooter" on the market and until today it is considered one of the best games in history. Would you like to see it released again, with the actual technology and a more detailed script?

You know, I love the game the way it is. Instead of remaking it, it might be a great challenge to adapt the principles of the classic Rainbow Six to all of the new opportunities the new technologies have opened up. But simply redoing it? I don't know. Then again, I don't like movie remakes, either, so your mileage may vary here.

2. Game Writing

What's the difference between writing for digital games and writing for Role playing games?

It's a question of scope, focus, and responsibility, I think. Tabletop games are all about creating expandable universes, things that players and Gms (*game masters*) can take and run with and go their own places with. So you're writing to spur people's imaginations in ways that they take the tools you give them and go. It's also much more a solitary pursuit – if I needed to add five thousand words to a Wraith supplement, I could generally sit down and do that as needed, and have everything the way it needed to be by morning.

Video games, on the other hand, are in a lot of ways about providing a seamless experience inside the world that you've made, and helping players to focus on the most interesting aspects of that world instead of constantly banging up against the things the game might not let you do. And, of course, there are a lot more people working on a video game, so everything you change impacts a lot of other folks' work. It's by definition a much more collaborative experience.

What is the attribute that most differentiates a movie writer from a game writer?

I've never written a movie, so I can't answer half of this. But I will say that when you're writing for games, it's vital to keep the game aspect front and center, to remember that it's player choice and decision that's driving the narrative. Game writing isn't a story you tell to someone, it's the story you help the player create with the narrative elements you give them to play with.

How do you begin as a writer? Tell us a little bit about how you entered Red Storm Entertainment. And in between all the functions you've performed, did you have any great difficulty? And how did you overcome it? (Please cite the functions you've performed in the company, including Ubisoft's).

I came to Red Storm from the tabletop RPG industry and White Wolf Gaming Studio. I worked at White Wolf for four years, and a friend at Red Storm named David Weinstein liked my work and suggested I apply there. I was starting to look for some different challenges - and Dave can be very persistent - so I gave in and applied, and the next thing I knew, I was living in North Carolina and working at Red Storm.

That was just over ten years ago, and in that time I've done game design, game scripting, and game writing for Red Storm, as well as managing their game design department. And since we were bought out by Ubisoft, I've also worked on various Ubi projects as a writer and a continuity resource. There have been a lot of challenges, ranging from the prosaic - I had no idea what was involved in terms of paperwork to go to Shanghai for two weeks - to the developmental and professional. But one of the great things about working at Red Storm is that you get a lot of support from the people you're working with, and it was never the sort of place where I felt I couldn't ask questions when I needed help.

Tell us a little bit about your work, what methodology do you use to transform literature into action for games?

Any form of adaptation follows the same core guidelines. You look to what the core elements, ideas, and characters of the property are - the things that make it interesting to adapt in the first place - and then you ask "how would it be fun to play with this?" You don't want to do a one-for-one adaptation, because you can't - reading a book or watching a movie is a fundamentally different experience than playing a game. Instead, you want to focus on what makes the thing you're adapting and appealing, and find a way to get that into the player experience. It can be anything - cool scenes, being cool characters, exploring cool places - but you always have to keep in mind that the experience of play is different from the experience of reading or watching.

The game "The sum of all fears" was released along with the movie of same name, but, its story in the game was a lot different. It looks like there has been a lot of work to transform an espionage story into a counter-terrorism game. Tell us a little bit about your participation on the script of this game.

Michael Fitch was the lead designer on *SOAF*, and the decision was made very early on to make a game that wasn't just a rehash of the events of the movie. After all, if people wanted that experience, they could just go see the movie. What we wanted to do was give them something that was different but that felt like an integral part of the story of *Sum of All Fears*, so we came up with a game narrative that was the "untold" story of the events of the movie. We made sure it meshed perfectly with the movie storyline, and it supported the sort of gameplay we wanted to do, which was a win all the way around.

Did the creation of the new Rainbow operators from "Rainbow Six – Vegas" had your direct participation? In what do you draw heavily on to construct each soldier profile?

That was largely the work of Lucien Soulban, who's a good friend of mine and a wonderfully talented writer. Character creation is always a very collaborative process - you have art crafting the look of the characters, design laying out the game role that they're going to fulfill, and writing coming up with the backstory and personality to flesh them out. But even the littlest details - tag lines or speech patterns or whatnot - go such a long way toward individuating each character. I mean, there's a ton of research that goes into really solid character building, but then you need to distill all of that research into an interesting, distinct, appealing, appropriate character gamers

As a writer, what is the most interesting character you've created? Why?

I'll always have a soft spot for Tom Hansen, from *Cold Fear*. Somewhere during the writing process, he turned into this slacker anti-hero who wanted no part of being trapped on a Russian ship with brain-eating mutants. So trying to come up with appropriate dialog for *that* guy, in *that* situation, became this really enjoyable challenge. After all, he didn't want to be there, and the trick was making him sympathetic and interesting enough to make the player want to be someone who didn't want to be there.

3. Tom Clancy

Does Clancy personally keep up with your work? Is there any direct participation of his in the production of these games?

At this point Mr. Clancy doesn't have any direct interaction with the games. I've met him, and he was very gracious, but there's always been a lot of room for the various writers on Clancy games - JT Petty, Clint Hocking, Taras Stasiuk, myself, and others - to maneuver in.

A lot of games from the Tom Clancy's series has never had published books – like the case of Ghost Recon. How are these scripts created? Do you draw heavily on Clancy's publications, or real-world news?

One of the great things about working with material like Tom Clancy's is that as an author, he has such a unique and easily identifiable voice. If I asked you right now what are the things that mean "Tom Clancy", you could probably rattle off five things that we'd agree on instantly – the military aspect, the research, the attention to detail, the high tech, the code of conduct, all of these provide superbly clear guidelines as to what is or isn't Clancy. And so, with any new concept we're working on, be it *H.A.W.x.* or *Ghost Recon* or whatever, the signposts are there to ensure that what we create is very much in line with what makes something a "Tom Clancy" game.

4. Realism

Rainbow Six, Rogue Spear and Raven Shield followed a growing scale of realism, making these games possible to be used as training tools for the security forces. Have you ever produced something specially for this purpose?

I've never personally been involved in a project like that, no. If nothing else, I'm not sure what kind of script they'd need :-)

From Rainbow Six: Lockdown on, we've seen a very strong tendency for the franchise to become an action shooter, following recipes used in consoles. This new standpoint released more exciting games, but these were less realistic. Have you been oriented to adapt Clancy's works to become more fantasized?

The one thing that you always want in making a game is to make it accessible to as many players as possible. If you make the best game in the world but it's hard for people to get into, then you haven't done your own work justice. So as a developer, you're always keeping an eye on how you can get the game into the player's hands quickly and easily and in a way that wants to make them play the game. I don't view that as "fantasized", I see it as getting the game where it belongs - with players. And you can take some incredibly complicated concepts or maneuvers in a game and still deliver them to fans in a way that's accessible. Try explaining combos from a fighting game to a beginner - it sounds amazingly convoluted ("What do you mean, X-X-Up-A-Back-Y?") but once you're actually in the game, it's not complicated at all. So I guess what I'm getting at is this: Every game is a new challenge and a new direction. The worst thing that can happen to a game is for there to be no more innovation as it goes forward. You always want to be thinking of ways to make the next one different and better, and sometimes that means changes. Nobody wants to keep making the same game over and over and over - you want the opportunity to innovate and explore possibility, and to give the fans something more than the same old, same old.

With all the reactions from the fans (seen mainly in the official forums of Ubisoft), do you believe that the next games from the Rainbow Six franchise will keep an "arcade" train of thought or will it be more like a "simulators" one?

Honestly, I'm so deep into *Splinter Cell: Conviction* right now that it's about all I can think about at the moment :-). This is where I get to put my fanboy hat on - and yes, I am a fanboy even after working on a bunch of Rainbow titles - and say "Whatever happens never, I know it's going to be cool - and I want to see it NOW NOW NOW!" :-)

5. *Final Message*

What is the message you would like to pass to the entire fan base in Brazil? Here the games Rainbow Six, Ghost Recon and Splinter Cell are very popular.

Keep having fun - what more is there to say? I'm just glad that people enjoy the games and want to keep playing them.

6. Need “Paçoquinhas”

Oh, and if anyone can find me a good connection for *paçoquinha* in the United States, let me know! I'm running out! Thanks!