

Thomas McGuinness

Narrative Design Portfolio

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Introduction

Hey there! I am Thomas McGuinness, a Northern Irish Canadian writer and narrative designer based in Montreal. Some of my favourite games include the *Dragon Age* series, *Hades*, and *Baldur's Gate 3*. I love how they ground the exciting fantasy of their worlds with diverse casts of compelling characters. As such, it should be of little surprise that fantasy is one of my favourite genres to work in, though I also have plenty of experience writing for horror, mystery, and romance too! My background in poetry and copy writing has made me incredibly adept at writing under tight wordcounts. I enjoy the challenge such writing requires, as I fiercely believe that great constraint always gives way to great creativity. I have a keen understanding of pacing and tone which I leverage alongside my wry sense of humour to develop natural sounding dialogue that is pleasing to the ear. If you need a snarky one-liner or a smooth flirt, I am the writer for you!

Project 1: The Dublin Mysteries (2023)

Project Summary:

- A multi-chapter interactive audio adventure game developed for EarReality.
- The series follows a series of supernatural murders occurring in turn of the century Dublin.
- Role: Main writer.
- Responsibilities: Owned story development, developed all scripts, implemented narrative into the TWIST Engine, wrote promotional market copy, provided voice direction for character VO.

Key Pillars:

- Create a sense of mystery and intrigue fitting of classic detective novels.
- Play into the unique history and politics of early 1900s Ireland.
- Make players feel like a detective: searching for clues, interrogating suspects, and making connections to solve the case.

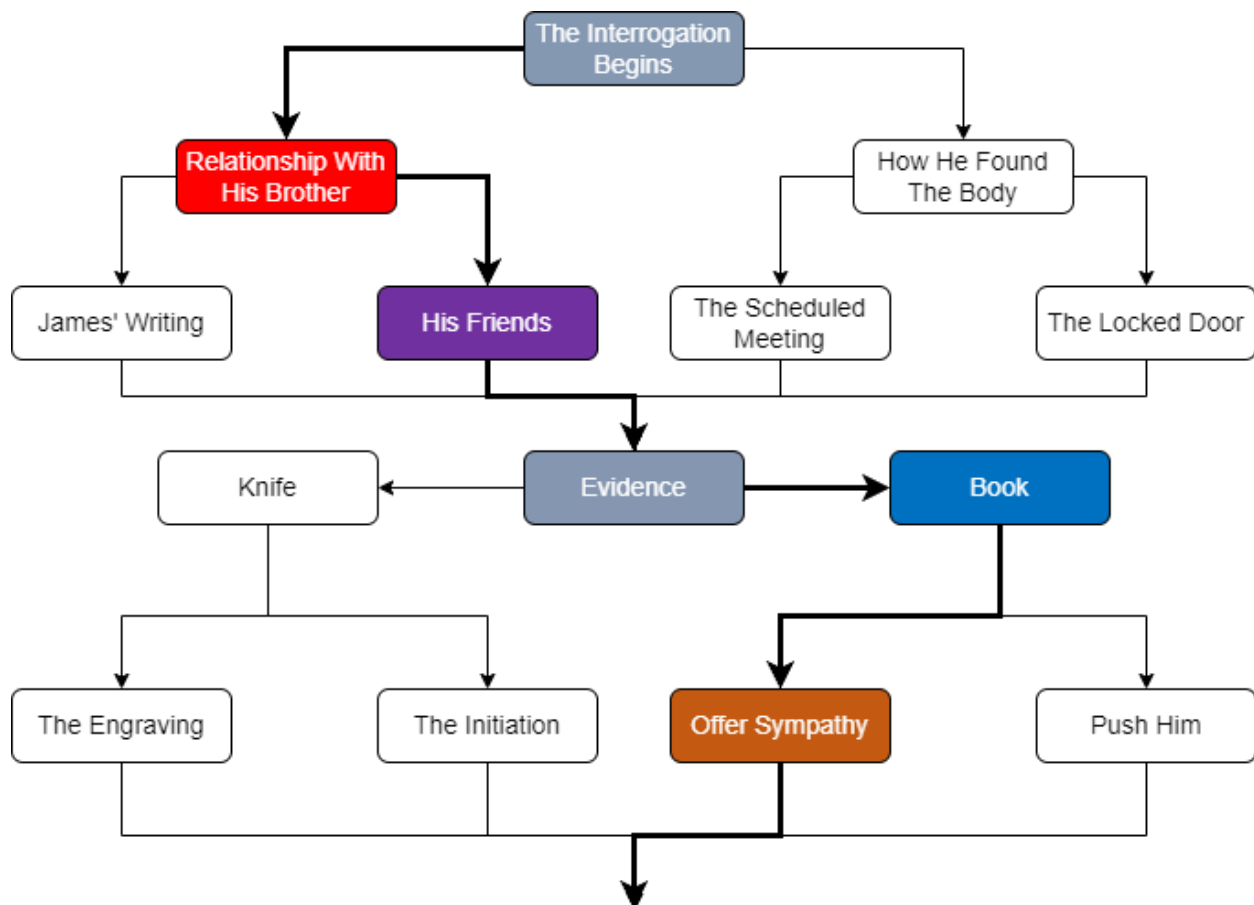
Full Game Link: <https://twist-ales.com/games/dublin-mysteries/>

Sample 1: The First Interrogation (Branching Dialogue)

In this scene, the player takes the role of Sean Carver, a blind consulting detective. Following the mysterious death of acclaimed poet James Conroy, Carver is called to assist in the interrogation of their first suspect: Charles Conroy, the victim's brother.

As this game is an interactive audio adventure, the player must be prompted for their choices before they voice their decision aloud to proceed.

The following branch is presented below, with selected choices appearing in colour.



The Interrogation Begins

Inspector Gregory leaves for a moment before returning with another man in tow.

[Gregory]: "Sean Carver, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Charles Conroy."

You can hear Charles fiddle anxiously with his wristwatch.

[Charles]: "James was my brother. And I was the one who... found him this morning."

Do you want to ask him about his relationship with his brother or about how he found him this morning?

Ask Him About His Relationship With His Brother

[Charles]: “James and I worked together. I helped him get his start, publishing his early writing in my magazine. We were close, or we were until he got those new friends of his.”

Would you like to inquire more about James’s writing or [his friends](#)?

His Friends

[Charles]: “James had grown close to a number of other writers who filled his head with ideas of a liberated Ireland. Republicans they were, through and through. Some of them even had a bit of a reputation for getting physical with their protests.”

[Charles]: “James and I had it pretty well with our lot in life. We’re respectable folk from a respectable line dating back to the Tudor plantations. I didn’t want his mixing with these dangerous characters to blow back on us and our families.”

Proceed to [Evidence](#)

Evidence

Gregory coughs loudly.

[Gregory]: “Pardon my intrusion, Carver, but I would like to ask Mr. Conroy—the surviving Mr. Conroy I suppose I should say— about the evidence we found on the body.

You can hear Charles stir at Gregory's words.

[Charles]: “Evidence? What did you find?”

The path will now split depending on if the player found the knife or [the book](#) earlier in their investigation.

The Book

You hear the unmistakable sound of tears hitting paper as Charles quietly weeps over the book.

[Charles]: “Oh, forgive me gentlemen. This was an old gift I gave to James. He had a big kick back in the day for Eastern poetry, especially haiku. He loved playing around with their structure: the five, seven, and five syllables.”

[Charles, breaking down]: “I just can’t believe that he’s gone. It’s finally settling in. My baby brother, gone...”

Would you like to **offer sympathy** to Charles or try to push him back onto the investigation?

Offer Sympathy

You pull out a handkerchief and give Charles a moment to wipe his tears and collect himself.

[Charles]: “Thank you for this. James and I had a wee bit of a fight last time we spoke. Knowing he still had this book—well, it’s given me a bit of peace.”

Proceed to [End of Interrogation](#)

End of Interrogation

Charles sighs, running a tired hand through his hair.

[Charles, tired]: “I’m sorry gentlemen, but it’s been a long morning. This has all been very draining and I still have to get started on making arrangements for the funeral.”

Gregory grunts in agreement.

[Gregory]: “That will be all for now. If we need anything more from you, I’m sure we’ll be able to find you.”

You hear the door click open and shut as Charles makes his exit.

Sample 2: Investigating the Desk (Puzzle Design)

Following the interrogation of Charles, the player's investigation leads them to James's desk where an opportunity presents itself to search it for clues. Players must decide between investigating the desk's numerous drawers or the mess of books covering its surface.

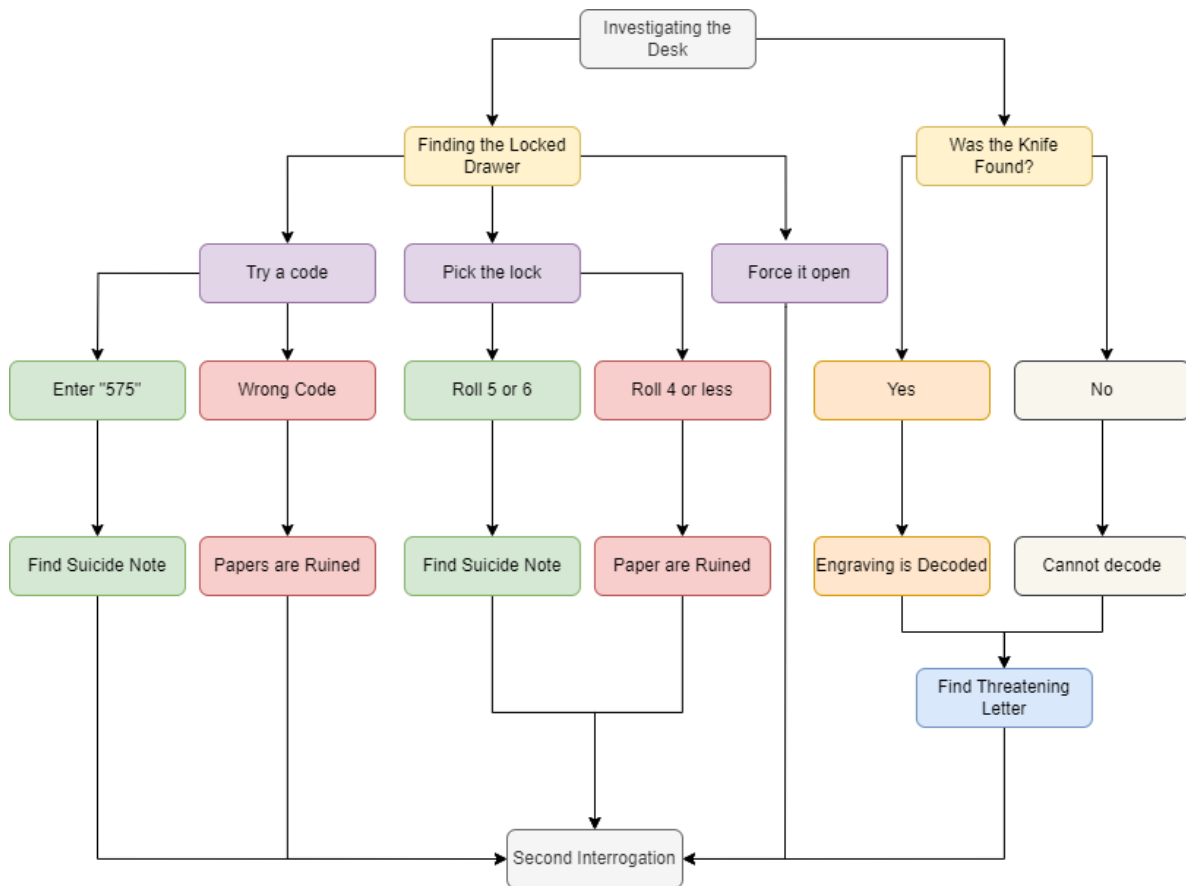
Should they choose to begin with the books, players with the knife in evidence will be able to use one of these books to decode the strange message engraved on its blade. This course of action was previously hinted at during Charles' interrogation if players asked him about the engraving. Following this, further investigation will reveal a hidden letter James's received from Charles, threatening him should he continue to incite revolution in his writing. This provides a possible motive for Charles to murder his brother.

Should players choose instead to search the drawers, they will find that one is locked by a mechanism requiring a 3-digit code. The only hint for the code is a small metal plate that reads "Basho". To attempt to access the drawer's contents, players must either input a code, pick the lock, or force the drawer open.

Players with the book in their inventory may recall an earlier conversation during Charles's interrogation about James's fascination with Basho's haiku and their 5/7/5 syllabic structure. Using the code 575 on the lock will open it without issue, revealing drafts of suicide notes in James' handwriting. A successful lockpicking roll will yield similarly successful results.

Attempting an incorrect code, failing their lockpicking roll, or attempting to force the drawer open will trigger the lock's safety mechanism: spilling vinegar over the drawer's contents and rendering the notes illegible.

At this point, all branching paths will gather into the arrival of Maeve, the next suspect to be called for interrogation.



Writing Authentically for *The Dublin Mysteries*

A lot of the inspiration for *The Dublin Mysteries* came from my University studies on turn of the century Irish literature. This was a time characterized by political turmoil, radical thought, and countless colourful characters whose realities were stranger than fiction. In other words, it was the perfect backdrop for a murder mystery. My research lead me from colonial issues surrounding policing to the history of secret societies and mysticism in Ireland. All of these facts coloured the historiciala landscape I presented in my game.

Some issues I initality faced when writing *The Dublin Mysteries* were the limitations of the audiobook format of TWIST games. Searching a room for clues becomes a whole lot harder when the player can't use their eyes. I decided to lean into this limitation by making the player character blind, using historical figures such as Carl Hardebeck to ground their visual impariment in fact. Braille had also been established for well over half a century at this point, informing Detective Carver's emphasis on touch in his investigating. It ironically took a keen eye and several editing passes to make sure that I never slipped up with this fact, finding meaningful ways to utilize other senses to bring the game's noir setting to life.

Project 2: The Antivan Rook (2022)

Project Summary:

- A quest design sample in the style of a companion recruitment quest for Dragon Age: Inquisition.
- Role: Quest & Narrative Designer.
- Responsibilities: Developed quest and characters, wrote all scripts, coded all interactivity, play tested for bugs.

Key Pillars:

- Mimic the tone of *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* fantasy setting.
- Expand upon the pre-established lore of the setting.
- Create an engaging character that would fit well among the existing cast of companions.

Full Game Link: <https://thomas-mcguinness.itch.io/the-antivan-rook>

Sample 1: Rocco (Character Sheet)

Name: Rocco "The Rook" Altieri

Age: Mid twenties.

Sex & Gender: Male, he/him

Ancestry: Human (Antivan)

Alignment: Chaotic Good

Key Traits: Showmanly, Sensitive, Earnest

Summary: The celebrity duelist.

Quote: "Give me a blade and I'll give you a good show."

Wants/Needs/Motivation: A swordsman without peer, Rocco uses his travelling performances and growing celebrity to follow the trails of the assassins' guild known as the Antivan Crows in search of his missing mother. He seeks the Inquisition's power and resources to help him investigate his mother's apparent abduction by the Crows and learn what ties she could possibly have with the guild.

Rocco's quest is ultimately a search for identity. In searching for his mother and uncovering her history as an Antivan Crow, Rocco must decide who he really is: the celebrity duelist, the assassin's son, or someone else entirely.

Other character relationships: As someone of common blood raised into a position of renown, Rocco is sympathetic to the Inquisitor and the struggles their newfound celebrity must bring.

Sample 2: The Rook's Voice (Barks)

Scenario	Tone	Line
About to fight a dragon	Anticipation	What happens when a Rook meets a Dragon? Let's find out...
About to fight a dragon	Grandstanding	Get ready for the show of a lifetime!
About to fight a dragon	Excitement	If we survive, I am never shutting up about this!
Approaching camp	Complaining	We could set up camp here. I could do with some beauty sleep.
Approaching camp	Helpful	Not a bad place to set up camp.
Approaching camp	Teasing	Care to set up camp here? I'll happily watch!
Spotting a merchant	Hopeful	Do you think they'll give me a discount?
Spotting a merchant	Curious	I wouldn't mind a peek at their goods.
Spotting a merchant	Excitement	You can never have enough blades! Let's get some more!
Enemies Spotted	Pride	Enemies ahead. Let's give them a good show, yes?
Enemies Spotted	Confident	Looks like someone wants a private performance.
Enemies Spotted	Anticipation	Ready yourselves my friends. Looks like a tough audience ahead.
Kills an enemy	Pride	Another falls to the Rook!
Kills an enemy	Bold	None can defeat us!
Kills an enemy	Heroic	Next challenger!
Low Health	Distressed	Things are looking dire for the Rook!
Low Health	Winded	I'm good, but not this good! Help!
Low Health	Hurt	Some healing would be appreciated!
Combat ends	Somber	Just like you taught me, Mother...
Combat ends	Joy	Great performances all around!
Combat ends	Triumph	As if it would end any other way!
Combat ends	Pride	Once again, the Rook stands victorious!

Project 3: Top Shelf (2024)

Project Summary:

- A sample mission for a zombie-survival game in the vein of *Zombies, Run!*
- Role: Mission Designer & Scriptwriter
- Responsibilities: Outlined mission objectives, developed dialogue, established character voices.

Key Pillars:

- Create a series of exciting and memorable story beats for the player.
- Maintain a balance horror, humour, and humanity in tone.

Sample 1: Mission Outline

In the wake of a zombie apocalypse, the player is a runner for the town of Sanctuary, one of the last remaining human settlements, venturing past the city walls to explore the wastes of civilization for supplies. While on such a run, mission dispatcher Tao contacts the player about an exciting new lead.

1. Tao radios the player, informing them that Sanctuary has received new intel of Chemsyn research files on the zombie virus archived in the Greenwood library. However, there is one glaring problem: the intel's source is Emilia, a local grifter, who wants the player to meet her outside the library. Tao tells the player to be on their guard as they provide them with the building's coordinates.
2. The player rendezvous with Emilia who patches herself into their comms. Emilia strongarms herself into joining the player on their expedition, claiming to know where the research is hidden in the library.
3. Emilia tracks down what she is looking for: a copy of *Harriet Hare's Hairy Adventures*. She reveals that is no secret Chemsyn research. This was all a ploy to retrieve a copy of this book for a sick child back in town. With Sanctuary's resources being spread thin, Emilia explains that she would have to lie to get the help she needed to retrieve it, but accidentally draws the attention of the library's zombie librarians. She flees with the player in tow.
4. No matter how hard they try, the runners cannot seem to lose the librarians. After Emilia complains about their constant clicking, Tao deduces that the reason these zombies are so good at tracking down the runners are that they are echolocating them. Setting off the fire alarm should leave them dazed enough for the two to escape. The player searches for a means to start a fire.
5. The player activates the alarm. With its klaxon ringing and the sprinklers noisily raining down, the zombie librarians are neutralized as they experience a sensory overload. Escaping the library, Emilia parts ways with the player as she heads back to Sanctuary with her prize in hand.

Sample 2: Script Excerpt

TOP SHELF: SCENE 3

EMILIA

Right! Here we are! *Harriet Hare's Hairy Adventures*. I've got a plastic baggie with your name on it.

TAO

...That doesn't sound like the name of a top-secret research file.

EMILIA

That's because it isn't. And there isn't one.

TAO

What? Emilia! You'd better have a good explanation for this!

EMILIA

I do! I've got a sick girl back home who's dying to read this. I couldn't make it through here by myself and didn't exactly think you'd let your precious runners waste resources digging through here unless there was something else to it.

TAO

So, you lied to us? Again?!

EMILIA

I honestly don't know what you were expecting at this point. To be honest, I was surprised you guys even agreed to listen to me in first place! But hey, I got my book. You got that trash you picked up. All's well that ends...

Emilia accidentally hits a bookshelf which knocks over another bookshelf, creating a chain of collapsing bookshelves.

EMILIA

...shit.

A series of moans and clicking sounds arise as several zombies are alerted.

EMILIA

What was that?

TAO

I think you just upset the librarians. You two should run. Now!