Penumbra: Black Plague

Dingy corridors? Blood-stained walls? Half-human zombies? No, **Nick Veitch** escapes LXF Towers for the day to immerse himself in a new 3D adventure.

Turn out the lights. Shut the doors. Lock them if you can. Close the curtains – you definitely don't want the feeling that someone is peeking in on you, not when you are playing this game.

Black Plague is the sequel to the earlier *Penumbra* title, *Overture*, (see **LXF98**). It doesn't matter much if you played the earlier title or care much about plots. All you really need to know is that you are trying to get out of a facility that is full of zombie-like half-humans. Oh, and there might be a good chance that your character is already turning into one too.

This adventure progresses through a series of locations, mostly grime-ridden and dingy rooms, in which a variety of puzzles must be solved before you can proceed. Usually the puzzles involve using objects near at hand to progress – like stacking crates together to get over a fence, or using a brick to bash open a lock.

> The puzzles you face are mostly logical, but you do need a spark of inspiration.
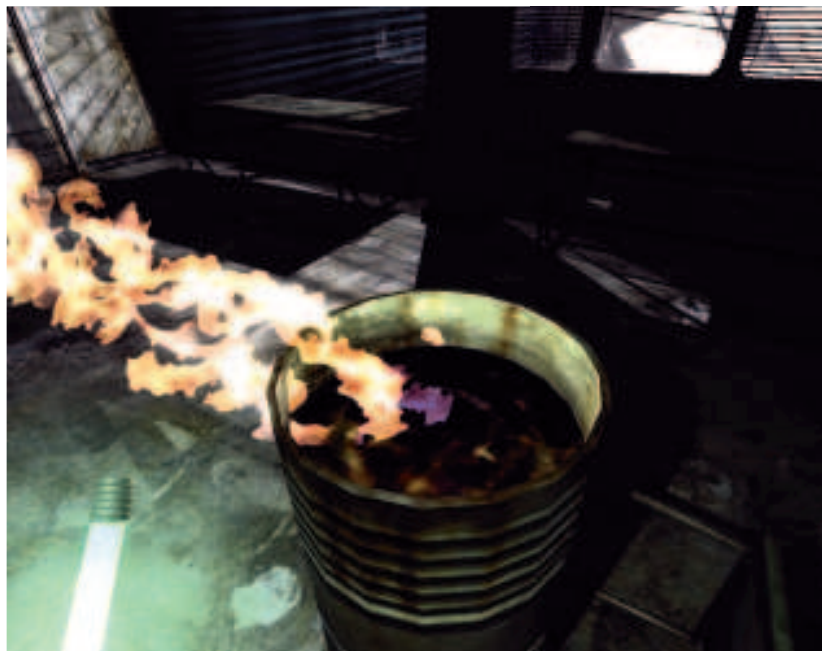
Take control

The puzzles themselves are for the most part quite logical, but what gives an interesting twist is the control mechanism. Like *Overture*, the action in *Black Plague* is played out in a realistic 3D world. A small dot in the screen shows what your character is looking at, and it changes depending on the actions that can be taken. When the dot switches to a hand, you can pick up or drag the object, spin it in the air or otherwise manipulate it. The hand also works on doors and other objects you would expect it to.

Is the sense of fear palpable? Well, it might depend on your disposition, and that of your graphics card. So much of the game atmosphere is communicated through graphic effects that this is really a game that deserves good hardware, preferably a GeForce 6800 or better, and you will want to use non-free drivers (tsk!). Creative use of distortion effects, blur and lighting steep the player in a steadily more surreal and eerie environment. The graphics play a large part in this, and if your hardware isn't up to it, you're missing out. In fact, it will also make the game a lot harder if you have to turn down the texture detail – maps and signs will become unreadable in places, and mission-critical objects may not be quite as obvious.

But the physics engine isn't the only immersive technique used here: there's also the hauntingly despondent

> **Various terminals and computers in the game fill you in on the plot.**
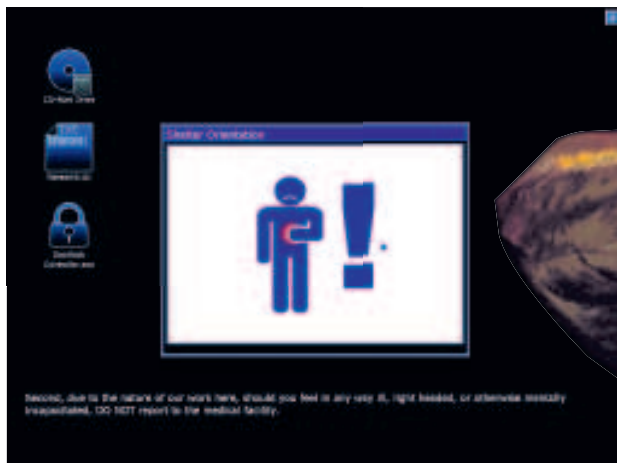
soundtrack, five minutes of which is enough to unsettle anybody. Even if it gets too scary for you, you really need to keep listening, because it is often the first warning of some approaching danger. Oh, and the narration is worth hearing too.

Obviously there is a limit to the amount of the real world that can be modelled. Leaving aside anything else, the number of texture maps would be prohibitive, and while many of the objects are simple polygons, that soon adds up in a room full of them. Also, the physical nature of object interaction can become annoying. Although it is realistic and novel to have to open a drawer by 'grabbing' it and mimicking a pulling action with the mouse, at times you long to just be able to click on the thing to open it. Rows and rows of abandoned lockers are likely to inspire more dread than the occasional 'infected' (the in-game name for the zombie-like humanoids). In fact, you don't see too many of the fearsome creatures throughout the game, and you are more likely to meet your end by an unlucky fall, drowning or triggering one of the infrequent traps. Actually, you aren't likely to get killed at all, but you will get stuck.

❯ Lighting effects help create a chilling atmosphere. And don't believe what you read...

The puzzles, thankfully, make sense for the most part. You need a can of drink from a machine? Well, we can think of at least two ways to do that. This makes it all the harder in some areas of the game when something really difficult is thrown in. For the most part all the items you need will be in plain view too, but every so often you will get truly stuck because you failed to realise that a splotch on the ceiling was actually a switch that you have to somehow reach.

Some areas of the game can feel repetitive, such as when you are faced with similar obstacles to ones that you have already overcome, but generally there is some sense of achievement from solving a particularly tricky part of the mission. If you knew exactly what to do, the game would take around four or five hours to finish, but you're going to get a lot of playing time out of this one. **LXF**

❯ It may look like the carvery at the LXF canteen, but this is actually one of the spookier moments in the game.

Real world?

The physics engine and game logic are designed to make the game world as real as possible. Objects can be picked up, turned about and used, thrown across the room or dragged along the floor if they are too heavy to lift. The game logic is linked to the physics, enhancing the effect. For example, say you want to flip a lever somewhere. You could 'grab' it with the virtual hand and manipulate it directly. But just for fun, why not pick up a box or a rock and drop it on the lever – it will still work. Bash it if you like, build a Heath Robinson assortment of pivots and weights if you want. Grab a small rock, go to the other side of the room and throw it at the lever – you might get lucky, you might not. The game is real enough in that sense, and does give an extra half-dimension of freedom.

❯ You only have one virtual hand! How are you supposed to get the sauce out?

Penumbra: Black Plague

Developer: Frictional Games.
Web: www.paradoxplaza.com/penumbra
Price: £10.68

Gameplay	7/10
Graphics	9/10
Longevity	7/10
Value for money	9/10

❯ *Better than it's preceeding title,* Overture, *this is a great diversion from the usual Linux gaming fare.*

Rating **8/10**