Penumbra: Overture

Blundering around in the cold, **Graham Morrison** discovers that the partial illumination alluded to in the title of this game is perfectly fitting.

In brief…

» **First-person adventure game with elements of problem solving and an involving storyline. A combination of old LucasArts adventure games, interactive fiction and** *Silent Hill.*

Firstly, we apologise for the low contrast in the screenshots that go along with this game review. The problem is that *Penumbra: Overture* is dark, and dark doesn't look good in print. Neither does scary, which is something that goes hand in hand with dark, both of which are used to good effect in *Penumbra*. This release is actually the first episode in a series of games designed to form a trilogy, and it will be the strong storyline that pulls players from one episode to the next, rather than cutting-edge graphics or game play. The story is as dark as the graphics, following our brave protagonist Philip as he stumbles into a quest to find the truth behind the death of his father and the secrets he left in a safety deposit box. There's even some cute voiceover work used to set the scene and talk you through some of the larger plot developments, along with some nicely illustrated images. Mind you, the main plot line seems to be conveniently pushed aside as Philip takes to the icy wastes of Greenland, finding shelter in an abandoned mine, only to find out that he's not the only denizen of this decrepit domain.

> Nicely illustrated artwork both helps to alleviate some of the doom and gloom you feel while actually playing, and adds atmosphere to the game too.

"An object's weight will affect how destructive it is when you throw it."

Undark

Penumbra: Overture is a 300MB download, and you'll need a relatively recent 3D accelerated graphics card and at least a 1GHz processor to be able to play it. The graphics in the game actually start out really good, with some excellent depth of field effects and rich textures at the very start of the game. But the significant capabilities of the graphics engine are lost on the rest of the game after you enter the abandoned mine. Varying levels of dark just don't look that great on screen, although there are several opportunities to light up the scene a little. You soon get used to either balancing battery usage in your torch or holding flares to provide additional lighting. This will provide a narrow area of

Step by step: Real Newtonian forces in action

» Boulder-ly going
To move a crate, we first need to remove the boulder from within the chest that are weighing the whole thing down.

» Lift and shift
Grab each boulder with the left mouse button and slowly lift each rock out of the chest and put them to the side.

» Push it real good!
Now that the crate is empty, we can use the cursor to push it to one side, revealing the previously hidden trapdoor underneath.

illumination just in front of you. You end up walking and running around the mine with the same feeling of trepidation that Howard Carter must have felt when he first shined light into the tomb of Tutankhamun. It's this dramatic lighting that creates all the tension, and the game is genuinely scary in places as you explore unlit passageways with the scratchings of some feral beast behind you, the twittering of an overgrown arachnid above you, and the mummified corpse of another adventurer lying at your feet. In many ways, this game feels like a throwback to early text adventures.

The story line and gaming devices owe a lot to games like Will Crowther's *Colossal Cave Adventure* or Infocom's mighty *Zork* trilogy. There's the unfathomable maze, plenty of locks and keys to be pilfered and the occasional rogue Grue. Old mining machinery needs to be coaxed back into action and various ingredients to explosive recipes need to be collected. There's even a control panel to decipher in a throwback to the Flood Control Dam #3 puzzle in *Zork I*. But in general, the infrequent puzzles aren't hard to crack, and usually involve finding the correct items and moving them to the right place.
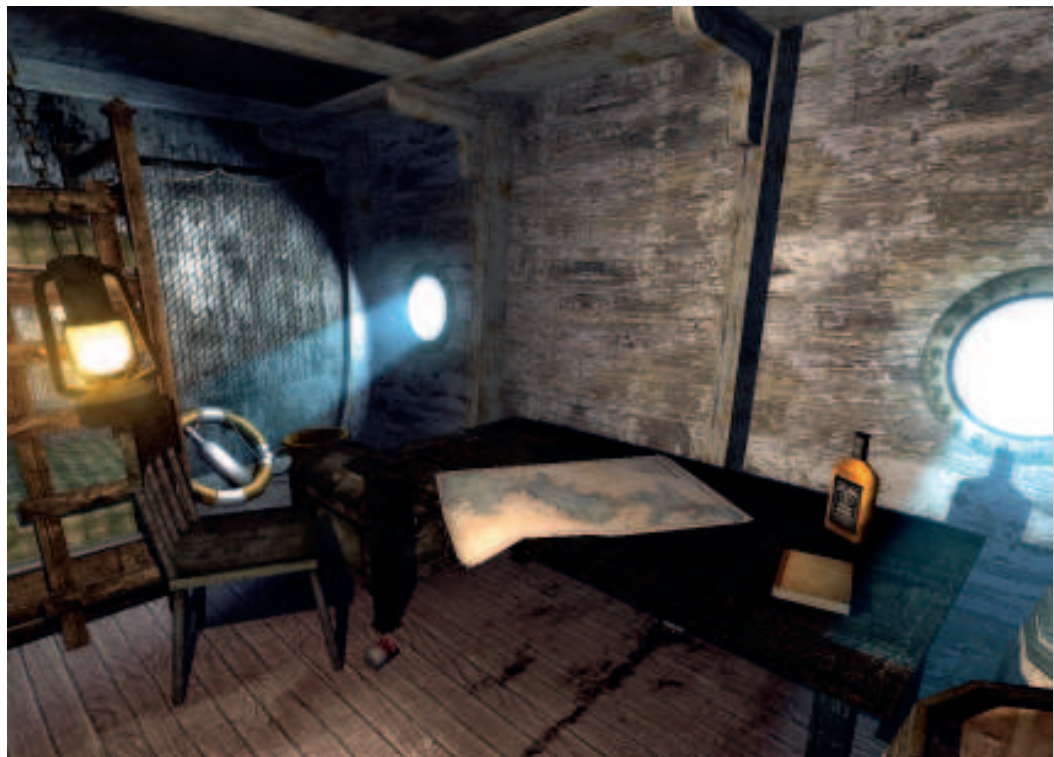
❯ **The game starts off in the world of daylight, which is the only time you get to appreciate the serious capabilities of the graphics engine – it gets more gloomy and atmospheric from here on in.**

Fizzics

But it's movement that really makes this game stand apart. Surprisingly, there's a fully fledged Newtonian physics model built into the game engine. You use a central cursor to pick up and move any object that you can see within the game area. Left-click on a whisky bottle lying on a table to pick up the object and hold it in your virtual hand. Move it up slightly by pushing on the mouse and release the left button to let the bottle fall. Flicking the mouse slightly will throw the object with a proportional degree of force, smashing the whisky bottle against the side of the cave. This works well, and really adds to the level of immersion you experience in the game. It's
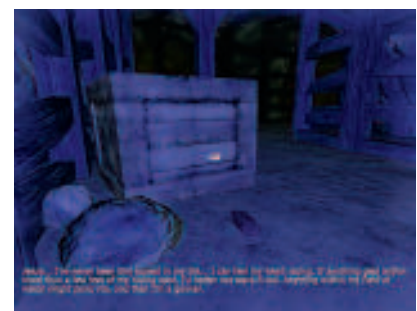
also used for puzzle solving, lifting trapdoors, opening doors and turning handles, for example. It can also create a few problems as the graphics aren't of a high enough quality to always see what you're doing. With a trapdoor, for instance, it can take some random positioning before your virtual hand is able to get a purchase on the correct side of the panel to be able to lift. And as fun as sliding drawers by hand is to start with, it soon becomes tedious as you try to quickly rifle through a room of cabinets to find that last piece of hidden Beef Jerky. An object's weight will also effect how manoeuvrable it is, as well as how destructive it might be when thrown at other objects: something you quickly learn when cornered.

Scary stuff

Considering the price, and the fact that the Linux version comes hot on the heels of the original Windows release (and before an imminent OS X version), this is a great addition for any devoted Linux gamer. It's far from perfect, and you do need to suspend your logic circuits for some of the plot developments and slightly monotonous find object/bring it here problem solving. But the dark storyline and sparsely lit interiors are perfect for those long nights ahead of those of us in the Northern hemisphere. And it's scary. You can't help but feel a twinge of terror as the batteries in your torch fail, leaving you standing alone in the dark – two yellow

eyes staring at you from the other side of the cavern. It's not a masterpiece, but if we can drum up enough support for the first episode, it will hopefully mean that the developers can approach the next episode with renewed confidence. **LXF**

❯ **Time to decide between torch and flare.**

❯ **The storyline is occasionally weak, but the plot has enough depth overall to pull you through and leave you wanting more.**