

**Game Title:** *Penumbra: Black Plague*  
**Platform:** PC/Mac/Linux  
**Genre:** Graphic Adventure, Survival Horror  
**Release Date:** 2/12/2008  
**Developer:** Frictional Games  
**Publisher:** Paradox Interactive  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Tom Jubert  
**Author of this review:** Ryan Cassell (ryan.cassell87@gmail.com)  
**School:** DigiPen, Institute of Technology

## Overview

In *Penumbra: Black Plague*, the player takes on the role of Philip Lafresque, an educated young Englishman in search of his long-lost father. After ignoring his father's warning to never come looking for him, Philip heads to Greenland, his father's last known location. Once there, Philip finds a hidden archaeological dig site that has accidentally unleashed the "Tuurngait" (*turn - gat*) virus upon its personnel, turning them into horrifying monsters. Exposure to the virus for more than a few hours causes symptoms of paranoid hallucinations and schizophrenia. Eventually, those exposed turn into the "Infected" - violent creatures that are slaves to the will of the Tuurngait Hive Mind, an alien creature that is both the source of the virus as well as the collective conscience of the Infected. Philip becomes infected by the virus shortly after entering the facility, but rather than becoming one with the Hive Mind like the other Infected, he is taken over by the mind of one of the Infected that has somehow broken off from the Hive Mind and has developed its own consciousness, calling itself Clarence. By manipulating the senses of his host body, Clarence causes Philip to doubt what is reality and what is an illusion as he navigates the dark, labyrinthine tunnels and structures of the dig site while avoiding being spotted by the Infected or any other creatures that might be lurking in the shadows or lying just around the corner. Philip must fight to save his sanity as well as his humanity as he searches for a cure to the infection.

*Penumbra: Black Plague* is considered by critics and fans to be among the scariest games released this decade. Naturally, for a game to have any chance of scaring the player, its narrative must be engaging enough for players to fully immerse themselves into the story. The high quality of the game's narrative is not only due to its use of psychologically complex characters that undergo personal conflicts during the game, but the ease with which the player can identify with the characters. This helps the narrative feel more personal to the player and become a far more engaging experience. The relative ease of immersion into *Penumbra: Black Plague's* world is also due in no small part to its stunning use of the environment to create a dark and foreboding atmosphere that keeps the player on edge and emotionally vulnerable. Those who've played the game can attest to the game's environment having an intimidating and foreboding personality of its own. All of these elements combine to create a terrifying experience that will occupy the nightmares of players for many nights to come.

## Characters

- Philip Lafresque - The main protagonist of the story and the only character controlled by the player. A physics professor at an English university, he travels to the dig site to find his estranged father, Howard. After becoming infected by the Tuurngait virus, Philip must question what is real and what is fake as he struggles to keep Clarence and the Hive Mind from taking away the one thing that he values most - his free will. In the end, Philip is willing to sacrifice anything, from obtaining an enlightened state of being by joining with the Hive Mind to even his own life, in order to be certain that his will is truly his own.
- Clarence - The antagonist of the story and the manifestation of the Tuurngait virus that inhabits Philip's mind. Clarence plays the role of Philip's Jungian shadow, voicing the desires that Philip is unwilling to admit are his own. Initially, Clarence's premise can be summarized as a desire to regain his previously lost sense of belonging to the Hive Mind, just as Philip secretly desires to regain his lost sense of belonging to his father. By the end of the game, Clarence's premise shifts to a desire to retain his individuality at the expense of others' well-being by attempting to kill Philip after acquiring his own body, a desire reciprocated by Philip's decision to exercise his free will and refuse the request made by the Hive Mind, forfeiting not just his own life but that of the Hive Mind and the rest of the Infected.
- Dr. Amabel Swanson - A research scientist who manages to survive the viral outbreak by locking herself in her lab. She offers hope to Philip with her knowledge of how to cure the Tuurngait infection. When Philip finally reaches her, Clarence tricks him into seeing her as an Infected and Philip accidentally kills her in self defense. The hopeful message she leaves behind on the computer, in addition to the disinfection process, adds a sense of guilt to Philip that further drives him to get rid of Clarence no matter the cost.
- Howard Lafresque - Philip's estranged father, who was thought to be dead until Philip received a recently written letter asking him not to come find him. Howard was brought on to the research site to try and analyze the ancient artifacts that had been uncovered there, but beyond serving as Philip's inciting incident for coming to the dig site, there is little else that Howard contributes to the game's narrative beyond a few audio recordings and journal entries detailing his discoveries.
- Tuurngait Hive Mind- The singular will of the Infected that exists deep within the dig site that had been disturbed by the scientists. When the scientists began excavating the artifacts to further study the Tuurngait, the hive mind attempted to stop them by infecting them with the virus. Once infected, the Hive Mind could directly convey the benefits that can come from being part of a single collective consciousness: an enlightened state of belonging and a faster rate at which progress can be made due to the increased value of cooperation and sacrifice that is demanded by all that serve the Hive Mind. However, those benefits

required the loss of free will for all that became Infected, a sacrifice that Philip was unwilling to make.

### **Breakdown**

*Penumbra: Black Plague* contains psychologically complex characters that encounter character-defining conflicts over the course of the game that shape their desires and values in a believable way. Clarence is unable to connect with the Tuurngait Hive Mind, which troubles him greatly since the Infected are dependant on the Hive Mind for the sense of belonging and purpose that it provides. Without that connection, Clarence feels abandoned by his brethren and becomes desperate to reconnect with the Hive Mind, even if it means killing his host body in the process. Gradually, due to the prolonged separation from the Hive Mind and his exposure to Philip's human desires for safety and self-preservation, Clarence develops an individual personality that fears his own death were he to rejoin the collective conscience of the Hive Mind. When Philip removes Clarence from his mind and inadvertently places him inside a reanimated corpse, Clarence experiences true freedom for the first and only time. Fearing what repercussions his newly created individuality might have on the Tuurngait as a whole, the Hive Mind orders the Infected to kill Clarence completely, removing any chance of his sense of free will spreading among the Tuurngait. Clarence was able to achieve a higher state of existence and a sense of individuality at the cost of his own life. But at the very least, Clarence could say that it was his life, however brief it might have been.

Another narrative element that *Penumbra: Black Plague* does well is its ability to immerse the player into the narrative through the manipulation of how the player controls and perceives the world. To drive home the point to the player that Philip is slowly losing his ability to control his own actions due to Clarence's presence, there is a moment where Clarence asserts his control by causing the player to stumble repeatedly, slowing down his movement, blurring his vision, twisting the world around him, and reducing the speed with which he can look around him drastically. In another moment, Clarence shuts off Philip's eyes and ears so that all the player can see or hear is black nothingness. These moments bring across the theme to the player that they are not currently in control of their own body and that unless Clarence is permanently removed from Philip's mind, they never will be. Knowing that there is a chance that their controls might be limited at an inopportune time is something that no gamer desires, which makes Philip's plight all the more relatable to the player and further immerses them into both the game's world and its narrative.

### **Strongest Narrative Element**

While it's difficult to decide on just one, easily one of the strongest narrative elements in the game is the significance behind Clarence's selection of his name and the similarities between his character and the one from whom the name is taken from. After looking through Philip's memories, Clarence is surprised to find that out of the over 1,000 films that Philip has seen in his life, the only one that he hasn't finished watching is the 1946 Christmas drama, *It's A Wonderful Life*. After griping about never getting to find out how the movie ends, the Tuurngait virus persona takes a liking to the name Clarence, after the film's guardian angel who showed the film's

protagonist, George Bailey, what life would have been like had he never been born. Several similarities can be found between Virus-Clarence's relationship with Philip and Angel-Clarence's relationship with George Bailey. Both Clarences are knowledgeable of every significant moment in their respective partner's lives. Both Clarences are capable of controlling how their partner interacts with the world: Angel-Clarence makes it so that no one in the past can see, hear, or feel George at all; Virus-Clarence manipulates how Philip perceives the world by hiding key items that were originally in plain view, by manifesting monsters that are not actually there, by weakening Philip's legs to prevent him from walking very far or fast, and even by shutting off Philip's ability to see or hear anything, leaving Philip alone in a black void with nothing but Virus-Clarence and his thoughts to keep him company (a scary proposition in its own right). Lastly, both Clarences reach a higher plane of existence at the climax of their stories: Angel-Clarence finally gets his angel wings after completing his good deed for George; Virus-Clarence achieves a symbolic pair of wings in the form of the corpse that he was able to reanimate after leaving Philip's body, to "fly" off on his own and reach a state of existence that no Tuurngait had ever achieved on their own, even if it was only for a few seconds. It's easy to assume that the reason the game's creative director chose the name of Clarence for Philip's split persona was due to the similarities between how both Clarences interacted with their protagonists.

### **Weakest Narrative Element**

The weakest narrative element of the game is the easy-to-misinterpret character traits of Dr. Amabel Swanson. According to a character postmortem of Swanson written by the creative designer of *Penumbra: Black Plague*, Tom Jubert, while special attention was given to her character in the hopes that she didn't become just another "rescue the princess" archetype, little of that effort was made apparent during the actual gameplay.<sup>1</sup> Her optimistic perspective on particularly morbid scenarios was meant to be ironic and humorous, in the hopes that the player would gradually start to develop an emotional interest in her, which would put a greater emotional impact on the player after Clarence's deception and Amabel's death. Unfortunately, a major flaw arose among Amabel's character traits. Due to insufficient testing, the creative designer failed to notice in time that most gamers are used to being lied to in games, which caused many gamers to misconstrue Amabel's quirky optimism as meaning that she was trying to deceive them. This unwillingness to trust Amabel reduced much of the emotional impact of her death for these gamers, reducing their overall experience of the game's narrative.

### **Highlight**

The strongest narrative moment in the game (and likely the scariest moment, as well) is after Philip has acquired the key card that will unlock Dr. Swanson's lab. It was obviously intentional that the location of the door to Swanson's lab be very familiar to the player as they had been required to walk as many as 3 different times by the same door just so that they could complete all of the steps needed to open it. With the cure to the infection so close, the player is likely to have their guard down in anticipation of the narrative resolution to Philip's dilemma so seemingly close, but on their way back an Infected bursts out of a supply closet and chases them. But rather than let the player

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<sup>1</sup> *Character Postmortem: Amabel Swanson*, Tom Jubert Writing Portfolio, <http://www.tomjubert.com/>.

run straight to the door, open it and escape the creature's clutches, Clarence decides to play with the player by hiding the entrance to Swanson's lab, disguising its well-known location with just another wall, heightening the player's anxiety as they continue running for their life as the Infected gets closer and closer. Just when the player has reached their peak of desperation and terror in the thought that they'll be forced to continue running from this creature indefinitely, Clarence finally gives in and reveals the door, back where it originally was, and the player is able to enter it and escape the Infected chasing them. This point in the game is particularly terrifying not only because the only viable option when it comes to dealing with an Infected that's spotted you is to run until you've entered another level, but that the well-known exit to the level has now disappeared due to another character's interference at a moment that might literally determine whether or not the player lives or dies. The game was able to take a simple shock tactic commonly used in horror games to evoke a cheap thrill from the player and, through a slight manipulation of the layout of a familiar level, turn it into a truly terrifying moment that stays with the player long after the initial shock wears off.

### Critical Reception

While not without its flaws, *Penumbra: Black Plague* received solid reviews and high praise for its atmospheric environments and engaging narrative, particularly with relation to the level of immersion that was achieved by the player into Philip's character. Reviewer Mark B. of game review site Diehard Game Fan felt that the game manages to do something with its narrative that many games do not: inspire emotional response.<sup>2</sup> Video game review site IGN's reviewer Charles Onyett gave the game's presentation / narrative a score of 7.5 out of 10 and commented on how the use of the game's perception-altering mechanic easily gets into the player's head by forcing them to second-guess whether or not everything they see or hear is reality, while suggesting that it could have been used more effectively.<sup>3</sup>

### Lessons

- Creating a polished atmosphere that evokes a sense of anxiety or fear in the player is exceptionally effective in getting the player to engage in the game's narrative. *Penumbra: Black Plague's* level design can tell a story using only a few well-placed, interactable objects scattered across a room, some eerie ambient sound effects, and a few flickering lights. This minimalist approach to game narrative can be just as effective as using dialogue to explain backstory to the player, perhaps even more so since it allows the player to come to their own conclusions about what events might have transpired rather than have it be spoon fed to them through dialogue.
- While it is generally considered a game play *faux pa* to remove any of the player's control over the camera for any length of time during scripted cut scenes, when used in moderation, it can be very effective in immersing the player into the personal quandaries of game characters, especially if the effects of those conflicts can be directly correlated to the changes made to the controls.

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<sup>2</sup> Review: *Penumbra: Black Plague (PC)*, Diehard Game Fan, <http://diehardgamefan.com/2008/04/22/review-penumbra-black-plague-pc/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Penumbra: Black Plague Review*, IGN, <http://uk.pc.ign.com/articles/849/849196p1.html>.

Slightly limiting the player's control during critical narrative moments that change how the player perceives and interacts with the game world has the added benefit of redirecting the player's expectations of what will happen next, which grabs their attention and greatly helps to immerse the player more deeply into their own character's narrative.

- Care must be taken to ensure that all characters that are vital to any significant plot moments during the game have accurately identifiable personality types with little room for misinterpretation. Holding playtesting sessions with a dedicated focus on the game's narrative is the best method for ensuring that a psychologically complex character's personality is being properly identified by the player.

### **Summation**

*Penumbra: Black Plague* is a prime example of how game designers can utilize the environment, character narratives, and controls to create an engaging game narrative that evokes greater emotional responses from the player. With additional narrative-focused playtesting, designers can be expected to create more easily-identifiable personalities for characters and environments that, in addition to a main character whose emotional states are structured to coincide with the emotional states of the player at key plot points, will further enhance the narrative capabilities of video games and reach people in new and profound ways unattainable through any other medium.