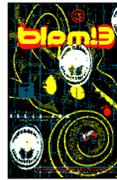




SWENSON & SEWARD / NEA

(ERIC SWENSON & KEITH SEWARD / NECRO ENEMA AMALGAMATED) *Blam! 3 The Final Fucking One* NYC 1997
ISBN 0 9639459 2 0 English text
CD-ROM & Audio CD PowerMac
\$ 25.00 review by ARIE ALTENA



You pick up your poison and you surrender wrote The Village Voice about Blam! 3, the last eruption from Eric Swenson and Keith Seward, together known as Necro Enema Amalgamated. I had been warned. I had read the press release which hovered on the edge of racism and other improprieties. I had been told about the filthy images - bloody breast operations, sex with animals, corpses. And I was aware of NEA's interpretation of interaction as super malevolent user training and tracking, in short, SMUTT. But I still fell into NEA's trap when I took a look at Blam! 3. I became the classic example of the user at whom Blam! 3 is directed, the user who will click onto anything to find his way through the information, who expects to be able to exit the CD-Rom by clicking 'quit', that genteel, self-choosing, user from the interactive utopia.

Unsuspectingly you start the CD-Rom, only to be overwhelmed by the ugly, imposing, techno. The sound is twice as loud as you thought your computer could handle. You diligently try to find the control panel, to be able to adjust the sound level. In vain: it is not possible. Meanwhile, all that clicking has landed you in a zone of the CD where pictures fly by that you do not wish to see, piles of dead bodies, deformed children, amateurish pornography, and the image flickers with a vengeance. You click on and on in search of the exit, but to no avail. Clicking impatiently, you find yourself among texts of hatred, barefaced homophobia, curses cruder than you have ever read before, incitation to murder. Escape does not work. Apple-Q does not work. There are two options: to wait patiently until you are back in the interface, where - very tidily - it says Quit at bottom right, or to pull out the plug. If you quit in the appropriate fashion, you will be treated to the words Goodbye forever! and a three-minute film of one of the inventive creators defecating in close-up. Very funny.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile viewing the CD once more. Because one of its many irritating characteristics is that it is horribly well-

conventions of the banal CD-Rom concept. Texts that you are supposed to read keep blinking, and if it is not the text, it is the background. The mouse pointer is missing: by moving your mouse you activate underlying clickable elements - if there are any. You cannot do anything with the keyboard. But everything tallies, everything works, and once you are used to it, it all seems very 'natural'. Moreover, the use of colour is overwhelming. Other CD-Roms pale before *Blam! 3* when it comes to interface design and implementation of the possibilities of Director.

NEA is a fervent and convinced opponent of the wide-spread myth of the new media giving all power to the user. According to NEA, 'interaction' as designed on the WWW and CD-Roms has nothing to do with 'user empowerment'. Interactive media are programming the users, programming choices, programming the users' behaviour and thought.

NEA has radicalised this insight into interaction design = design of a dictatorship. This is realised in *Blam!'s* 'philosophy' of 'user hostility', which is explained in two texts included on the CD. What is striking is that NEA's theory on 'user tracking' corresponds in all respects with the programmes on commercial websites, which will track out the visitors' movements and then serve up such information as matches the visitor's profile. Whether this is to the advantage of the user (who receives tailor-made information) or the supplier (who serves up what will encourage the user to buy or return) is irrelevant. This is where the circle between rabid user hostility and commercial customer-friendliness is closed: *Blam!'s* user hostility provides the means for tailor-made customer service. It is the reversal of the WWW utopia of the user him/herself selecting the information that he/she wishes to consult.

Blam! proves that the 'design of freedom for the user' is a dictatorial matter, and has all the characteristics of totalitarianism. *Blam! 3* demonstrates what this means: there is no escape. There is only one world, one option, 'affirm action', and that is what you are stuck with. That *Blam! 3* is full of vile image material and even vile texts and theories - things you would not easily watch or read if you had a choice - enhances your feeling of being locked up. It is totalitarian that you have to see, read, experience this. And yet, it is not quite right.

NEA, as the 'Devil's Advocacy Group', aims to *take up any cause in the face of even the most hallowed truths*. This explains the toying with perversities and hateful socio-racial rhetoric. Swenson and Seward defend every wrong idea, but to what purpose? Who is the virgin to be sanctified, against which this devil's advocate argues? If it is indeed the idea of 'interaction is user empowerment', why choose this material as content? As subtle as *Blam! 3* is in interface design and implementation of the Director possibilities, as banal and inconsiderate are the designers in the elaboration of content.

Blam!'s strategy appears to be related to that of the historical avant-garde: creating art by undermining ingrained conventions or ridiculing anything sacred. In their manifesto-like writings, NEA does not beat about the bush: the idea is to rub the user's nose in his conditionableness. This is often precisely what a successful work of art does to a reader or viewer (who becomes irritated, confused), but, with the same movement, such works also add a bonus in the form of insight, a glance into a richer world, or an aesthetic experience. *Blam!*, on the other hand, never gets beyond causing irritation.

It is a hard and fast rule that, in a work of art, content and form cannot be separated from each other. If you adhere to this rule,

cannot get a grip on. But if you no longer regard NEA as authors or artists, but rather as designers, everything falls into place.

Blam! is ultimately the project of two designers who are perfectly aware of the possibilities of Director, but lack a content with which they can freak out. Therefore, out of sheer spiritual poverty, they are flirting with 'incorrect' material like two irritating 'bugs', to annoy the user even more. You can hear them giggle like Beavis and Butthead. Yeah, cool, *hu-hu*. It is fake, insincere, and because of this they never get beyond measly taunting. *He-he*. Compare it with a Céline whose only intention is to bother the world with politically incorrect babble and sits at home sniggering over his own bad joke.

Therefore, *Blam!*'s criticism of the idea of interaction as 'user empowerment' cannot be taken entirely seriously. It is taunting. What remains is the design: beautiful colours and state-of-the-art interface design.

Now, how can the freedom-loving user still, without irritation, acquaint himself with the totalitarian hell of *Blam!*? *You pick up your poison and you surrender?* No. Be patient (more patient than is required by the TV, or a book). And shift the interaction from system to machine. Where clicking the mouse fails to bring about a dialogue with the system, it is still possible to control the machine on which the system is run. The irritating techno can be eliminated by a headphone plug in the headphone port, the image can be faded out with the clarity switch on the monitor. While you are waiting, read a poem and go back to the computer when the misery you want to avoid is over. It is a bit primitive, but it works, and who knows, such a treatment of (or rather action against?) the medium could enhance your 'critical glance' on the world behind the screen and the interaction. And that is your user's licence.

translation OLIVIER & WYLIE

