Columns

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MACHINE AGE

BY **AUSTIN BUNN**

Sadistic Disc

Forget trying to adjust the volume--the techno beat blaring out of your computer speaker is entirely out of your control. Clicking adamantly won't stop the strobing images of bestiality, animal experimentation, and defecation (yep, live) that pulse across the screen. In fact, in the 13 spectacularly offensive segments of the new CD-ROM *Blam!3*, you pick your poison and surrender. New York's Necro Enema Amalgamated (NEA, get it?), the two-man company that produced the disc, takes care of the rest. As one section explains, "We don't wait for you to push our buttons, we push yours first."

Blam!3, subtitled "the final fucking one," is the latest and most ambitious in a series that goes so far beyond the pale, it's transparent: shock value may be the currency, but the real issue is not *what* you're looking at--it's *how*. With all the obscenities and wildly disorienting navigation, it can be hard to tell that *Blam!3* may actually point to the future (gulp) of interface design. As industry standards simplify and homogenize our computers, *Blam!3* confronts us with the variety of alternatives we're ignoring. For its two provocateurs, this home-brew monstrosity is the execution of an emerging philosophy: user hostility.

The *Blam!* series was designed as a "textbook of user manipulation" that "punishes" the user for "interactivist tendencies," explains NEA (necroenema.com) cocreator Eric Swenson. "We will crash your machine or force you into very abrasive repeat loops (which you cannot stop except by physically killing the power on your machine) just for spending too much time clicking around like an idiot, searching for familiar (and stupid) common interface elements."

While software and CD-ROM developers dumb their product down to the lowest common denominator, Blam! has become a form of political resistance. Swenson (a new media executive and digital media adjunct professor at Pace) and his partner Keith Seward (an NYU philosophy professor) want to attack the "myth that multimedia is empowering and that interactivity is, or even can be, liberating," says Swenson. "Programmers are just that-- programmers not only of code, but of people."

Who thought technosadism would be so pretty? While *Blam!1* was black-and-white and *Blam!2* oversaturated with color, *Blam!3* has discovered the balance between design and dogma. In *Blam!3*, users access hyperstylized sections like "Nigger Trigger," "Kreepy," and "Monkey Show" through invisible interactive fields on the screen. It can take a few sessions just to find the mouse icon, which slyly changes shape and often vanishes completely. Perverse beyond measure, *Blam!3* is a fun house of maddening and brilliant trapdoors in navigation.

Though the work may be hard to watch, it has garnered key support from renowned New York digital artist M.R. Petit (who produced The Mutant Gene & Tainted Kool-Aid

SideShow CD-ROM) and ex--Voyager head Bob Stein. "There's a definite philosophy at work" about interactive hostility, says Petit. "If you get really angry at *Blam!3*, then that's saying a lot about yourself at some level."

Not surprisingly, Swenson and Seward confuse and frighten people extraordinarily well. They share the honor of being the first two people to get kicked off the Echo BBS, after spamming the bulletin boards about their bowel movements. Petit, a longtime Echo member, recalls, "He performed experiments on people on Echo that you wouldn't perform on lab rats." Swenson's professors submitted his master's thesis (at the Interactive Telecommunications Program) to a psychologist for review, while *Blam!2*, the most genitally obsessed of the three, is banned in Japan.

The creators are also survivors. As the legendary Voyager company shuts down its CD-ROM division, the $25 *Blam!3* hits the market deep into the bust cycle of the CD-ROM industry. According to Swenson, 30,000 *Blam!*s are currently in circulation--not a bad figure for a company that insults its own consumers. Swenson wants to make it clear that nobody said you actually had to like them to buy their work--their nasty personalities are as much their art as the discs themselves. Of *Blam!3*, he says with relish, "We hope that at least a few people jerk off to it. If you still don't get it, die."

Sonic Testing

It happens to an industry in its adolescence--certain companies hit puberty before others. Like a rite of passage toward adulthood (and corporate respectability), online music entertainment company SonicNet (sonicnet.com), one of the Alley's scruffier and more stylish operations, may have become the first New York new media company to administer a drug test for its employees last month.

According to SonicNet head Nicholas Butterworth, all 22 staffers, who were notified early and had at least a two-week window in which to submit their urine samples, passed the exam. Sources say that some samples were too watered down in the first round, and nervous employees had to take the test twice, but Butterworth would not confirm this. The exam itself was mandated by SonicNet's new owner, TCI Music, a division of cable giant TCI, which purchased the online service and its subsidiary properties Addicted to Noise (for news) and Streamland.com (for video-on-demand) in December.

But while the drug test may have surprised some of SonicNet's employees accustomed to looser scrutiny, the new corporate--start-up hybrid with TCI Music has proved a huge asset, positioning SonicNet to become the next-generation MTV. On Monday, SonicNet announced it has rebuilt its entire service into a huge "network," set to relaunch in March with "not a pixel remaining" of the old version, says Butterworth. Combined with TCI's 14 million subscribers and investments in the cable-modem service @Home, SonicNet's streamlined new design is just the first step for a potential migration from the Web to TV. "This is a 100 per cent relaunch," chimes Butterworth. "It's 10,000 times more content--it's sick." And sober.

Grrl Netwrrk

With the publication of her new book *Cybergrrl: A Woman's Guide to the World Wide Web*, Aliza Sherman, president of the feminist Cybergrrl Inc. consulting group and one of the creators of the Cybergrrl Web site (cybergrrl.com), has brought branding to its logical conclusion: franchising herself. From constant speaking engagements to the management of over 100 nationwide chapters of Webgrrls, Sherman is mastering the art of promotion and--from her vantage--education.

The book is a key step in Sherman's strategy to encourage more women to go online. Not