

## Don't Shoot

by Justin Hall

August 2004

What if video games could teach us to be more grounded? The Journey to Wild Divine, a new adventure game series that teaches self-awareness through biofeedback and visualization, turns the quest for calm into entertainment.

The Passage, the first game in the series, allows you to hook yourself up to your computer and use your energy levels and breathing patterns to make stuff happen. As you journey through the mystical lands of The Wild Divine – graphically dazzling world of mammoth palaces, sacred temples, soothing waterfalls, spiritual guides, and entrancing gardens – a door won't open unless you raise your energy level to break the seal, and a fire burns in a fireplace only if you light it by calming yourself. Basically, you navigate this mythical realm with the power of your thoughts.

All the action takes place thanks to special biofeedback sensors. Three “Magic Rings” attach to your fingertips to measure your energy level – specifically, your skin-response level (fluctuations in electrical resistance associated with your emotional changes) and your heart rate. But instead of taking a lie-detector test, you're actually playing the game with those biological functions: The sensors share their data with the game software, which translates it into activity on-screen. Controlling your breath is a key part of the adventure: Breathing rapidly gives a quick boost to your energy level, while breathing more slowly and smoothly lowers it. In the context of the game, you can practice energy awareness with amusement and see its effects immediately.

You experience something of a breakthrough the first time you star

at the screen and realize you can affect the action without moving a finger. For anyone accustomed to working on a computer – or tapping frantically on the button of a video game control pad, for that matter – sitting completely still in front of the machine and interacting with objects on-screen seems like magic.

As you undertake Wild Divine's version of the hero's journey and progress through the many realm so f the game by successfully negotiating its challenges, you become more skilled at modulating your energy. And that is the primary aim of the game, although in The Passage, the objective at hand it to pass the Tower of Legends and reach the Murdias River Bridge. (In the next installment, due out in March, players will cross that bridge and visit the Realm of Amplified Power and Wisdom).

The Journey to Wild Divine offers rich visual stimulation laced liberally with Eastern flavors but tasting of no spiritual sensibility in particular. At times, the gumbo can be slightly jarring: Ornate hot-air balloons rise over Egyptian gondolas; you're asked to hold a tranquil mind state while staring at a pulsing waterfall surrounded by Huichol yarn paintings and vibrant lotuses; standing near an onion-domed temple, you can conjure up NASA picture of the Bubble Nebula. Tibetan monks, charkas, snowy hawks, Hindu dancers, glowing wolves: A dense, eclectic mix of symbols is applied to the search for enlightenment.

You're not going to learn any particular deep lessons about meditation with this; ultimately the game is less about the theory of mind stilling and more about the practice of becoming calm. In that

sense, it really works. As a rather hyperactive computer entertainment aficionado, I found the Wild Divine puzzles that require calmness or a steady energy level to be most challenging – and most rewarding. You hold your breath steady to wake a sleeping priestess and relax yourself to bring a nearby boat to shore. As the game progresses, you're asked to create near-comatose levels of calm.

Most desktop computers represent speed and productivity – we sit in a rolling chair as we use them, leaning forward, actively clicking, communicating, reading, writing, or crunching numbers. It feels truly novel to be sitting in that same chair, facing that same screen, and yet be focused instead on slowing down and finding harmony. (Of course, that tranquility comes at a price: The game lists for a hefty \$159.95. Visit [www.wilddivine.com](http://www.wilddivine.com) for more information.)

On the face of it, it's laughable to find yourself getting close to sleep in front of your computer *on purpose*. But after a session with Wild Divine, I felt happily, almost inappropriately relaxed at my desk, and later – in stressful situations – I found myself thinking about the techniques for calming my mind that had worked in the game.

Yes, it's terrifically gratifying to be able to float a feather on-screen while sitting still; for someone accustomed to (or even just curious about) a meditation practice, it's fun to see the immediate results of controlling your mind. But perhaps the highest calling for Wild Divine is this: It trains us to relax our bodies and mind in our thoroughly modern situations.