

By Patrick Kampert
Tribune staff reporter
Published April 18, 2004

Toying with the idea of inner peace

In an age when most publicity for video games is reserved for the violent ("Grand Theft Auto") and the ultraviolent ("Manhunt"), two Colorado entrepreneurs just want everybody to take some deep breaths and grab some inner peace.

In "The Journey to Wild Divine," Kurt Smith and Corwin Bell have designed a computer game that teaches players to use biofeedback sensors worn on three fingers to help them control various events. Yes, in this game, the joystick is your body.

By using breathing techniques to stimulate or soothe their biological responses, players can start an onscreen fire, juggle brightly colored balls and direct the flight of birds.

"We took ancient technologies--yogic breathing methods--and coupled that with modern technology--computer gaming," said Smith, whose background includes developing high-tech medical technology.

Both men are avid meditators as well as mountain climbers, and the Buddhist influence wafts through the game like a bowl of incense.

"Wild Divine" also features Bell's visual artistry and gaming savvy. With Himalayaesque peaks in the background, players navigate their way through templelike buildings, gardens and forests as they collect items that will later be used in the game.

Flowers, for example, are to be presented as "offerings" to see the "Dancers of the Double Derga." Colored gemstones must be placed in the appropriate holders at the Rainbow of Rocks to unleash the power of Harmony, Love, Truth, Beauty, Trust and Peace. When that happens, lightning bolts arrive, the ground splits and colored lights erupt from the fissure like a Skittles commercial. Taste the rainbow, indeed.

Along the way, players meet various tour guides--actors, not 3-D simulations, who will help them on their journey. These, too, fit some karmic stereotypes with names such as Sophia, Cosmo, the Lady of the Wood and the Lady of Compassion.

The game also features an onscreen mentor, a Buddhist monk who in real life studied under the Dalai Lama, dishing out advice on "Divine" and the game of life. (The monk consulted with Smith and Bell on some of the game's spiritual facets. So did Jean Houston, the controversial "human potential" mystic who guided then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton on her imaginary conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt a few years back.)

Currently the game is available online at wilddivine.com and through a few retailers for \$159.95, including discs and sensors. Down the road, Smith said he hopes the game's appeal will fan out from home users into his old field of medical technology. He said he hopes to see, for example, patients in pain-treatment centers across the country using the game to bring them some comfort.

Buddhists and New Agers will enjoy "The Journey to Wild Divine." And even if some others find it about as welcome as a colorful book being hawked by a pushy, robed stranger at an airport, there's definitely something to be said for a game that hopes to heal instead of maim. What a countercultural concept.

Copyright © 2004, Chicago Tribune