

Lord of the rings

A computer game that raises consciousness instead of raising Cain? **Clint Witchalls** finds a magical world at his fingertips

I can't believe that I learnt to juggle in less than five minutes, and I didn't even use my hands. I juggled the balls with my mind. I've been playing a new computer game called *The Journey to Wild Divine*.

The game, developed by a biomedical engineer, Kurt Smith, and a graphics designer, Corwin Bell, uses the principles of biofeedback — a medical technique developed to allow patients to gain some control over their physiological responses and improve relaxation. Players are taken on a journey through a land of mystical gardens, snow-capped mountains and wise seers. You wander through a luxuriant 3-D landscape armed with a magic wand and an Eastern guide called Mila Rugom.

The game has a number of levels in which you perform increasingly difficult tasks, such as levitating a ball, shooting arrows with your mind, and controlling the flight path of geese. If you wave your wand and a purple haze appears, you know there is an event you can play. If you need help, you can click on the guide and he will tell you how to proceed. If you're not up to the task, you can bookmark it and return later.

The "inner active" game, released in the US in November, comes with three "magic rings" (the biofeedback sensors). The plastic rings are attached to your fingertips. The middle one monitors your heart rate, and the other two your galvan-

ic response, (ie, the rate at which you sweat). The more you sweat, the more excited or nervous you are. The heart-rate sensor measures your heart-rate variability, the change from one heartbeat to the next. At the end of the game, a printout reveals how you fared against the best efforts of one of the co-developers, a former Tibetan monk named Nawang Khechog.

The makers of the game claim that it can teach players to control their heart rate through yogic breathing techniques and also to control their level of excitement. A pair of eyes, called "Durga eyes", offers a visual clue as to the amount of energy needed for an event. For some tasks, such as levitating a ball or raising a bow, you need to raise your excitement levels. The Durga eyes change colour to magenta to let you know that uplifting thoughts are needed. For other activities, such as lighting a fire, you need to calm down, so the eyes change colour to blue. The idea is that once you have taught yourself to go from being excited to being calm, you can use this skill in your daily life. Just had a parking fine? Never mind. Use the heartbreath technique and think of wind chimes tinkling gently on a summer breeze.

Biofeedback has been around for about three decades, but has caused excitement among researchers recently. Last year Imperial College, London, published a paper saying that the technique could help to

improve a student's musical ability by 17 per cent — the equivalent of one grade. Researchers at Nasa have used biofeedback to help children to increase their attention span.

Computer and video games usually involve stealing cars and beating up prostitutes, so it came as a nice surprise to find a game that aimed to raise consciousness rather than raze buildings. But what would my nine-year-old son, Liam, a games connoisseur, make of this trippy-hippy game? Would he snort at the dearth of bazookas and other WMD? Would he try to garrotte a guru?

I interrupted his game of *Enter the Matrix* as he was busy running on walls and gunning down secret agents. "Would you like to try a new computer game? You control the game with your mind," I told him. "Yeah, cool," he said.

Two hours later, I sneaked back to my study, expecting to find an empty chair and three magic rings dangling from my desk, but there was Liam, breathing like a yogi.

"So what do you think of the game?" I said. "Best game I've ever played . . . Look, I'm doing it," he replied.

While I had potted around the Sun Realm, Liam had already reached the Town of Reverence.

I had assumed that a nine-year-old boy would lack the self-control needed to calm himself down. I was wrong. Maybe the next time he is bouncing off the walls or annoying his sisters, I'll send him to his room to play computer games — well, *The Journey to Wild Divine*, at least. It's the best punishment he could ask for.