

Game may alter philosophers' image

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Since the days of Plato and Socrates, philosophers have been typecast as intense thinkers who sit alone brainstorming for answers to global problems.

But Dr. Peter French, chairman of Trinity University's philosophy department, and several of his students are trying to change philosophers' stereotype. To do so, they've enlisted the help of a computer and Jack-the-Ripper, who 100 years ago in August began slashing his way to infamy in the dark, fog-filled streets of London.

The Ripper game is the most popular and most marketable because it centers on a case that "people have struggled with for 100 years and we still may not have the answer," French said.

For the Ripper program, several top-notch philosophy undergraduates were hired to pour through mounds of books, newspaper articles, magazines and other literature to set up the game's data base and to come up with a theory to evaluate against other theories.

"We're about as certain, given the evidence that has been amassed, of who the Ripper is. I think we've hit on the best explanation and it's not the same explanation as what was in the recent book that came out on Jack the Ripper," French said.

"What we're about as certain, given the facts, the opportunities, the alibis, the motives, what all the normal things you look for in a criminal investigation have to do with the actual facts of the cases," he said.

The latest book, "Jack the Ripper, the Complete Casebook," by Donald Rumbelow, claims that Montague Druitt, a young school teacher and attorney, committed the murders after he became insane.

The author, a London policeman, claimed he had access to some of Scotland Yard's most confidential papers for his research and suggests there may have been a coverup among law enforcement agencies.

The last victim, Mary Kelly, a 22-year-old prostitute, was killed on Nov. 9, 1888, and Druitt's body was found in a river in early December. The dates suggest he was the Ripper because the killing's stopped with his death.

Although French believes there may have been some public corruption in the coverup, he does not believe Druitt was the stalker.

"You can't make the facts fit your favorite theory and the program is designed to force you to pay heed to the facts and if you don't and come up with an interesting theory, but it's off the wall, the computer tells you that," French said.

French won't divulge the killer's identity, saying it would defeat the purpose of the game.

Much of the Ripper programming was done by Susan Sweeney, a 22-year-old graduate student who will continue post-graduate philosophy studies at Syracuse University in the fall.

"What really excites me about this is that you are trying to solve a problem that doesn't have a definite solution," she said.

The first screen of the computer game sets the tone for what is to come. The background is in blood red and the data tells the players the who, what, where and when of each murder.

The next stage, the first to test the player's logical reasoning skills, asks whether the sleuth wants to know about the victims or suspects.

The victims' category, Ms. Sweeney suggests, is the most logical choice to begin an investigation. Each victim has an individual file, with numerous subsets that can be accessed by one-word nouns.

For example, if the sleuth wants to know about the weapon used, the word "weapon" can be typed in and the computer will retrieve all information about the weapon believed used.

If information about injuries is wanted, "disembowelment" would retrieve information that describes in gruesome detail the victim's condition when found.

The words witness, investigation, countless, doctor, coroner, suspect, prostitute and autopsy others also retrieve information from the data base to help in the investigation.

Like true-life detectives, the computer sleuths are encouraged to keep a notebook to jot down some of the descriptions or names of witnesses because reaccessing information will cost points at the end of the game.

Once satisfied there is enough information about the victims, the detective can access the suspects' files and search for clues. The player can also compare what the victims and suspects had in common.

When the player is convinced he has solved the crime, he goes to the last section of the game and tells the computer the last identity of the killer.

What French and his students have developed is a computer game that allows the player to trade in the philosopher's toga for the Scotland Yard detective's deerstalker cap and trench coat in search of the murderous fiend who disemboweled five prostitutes between August and November 1888 in the White Castle area of London.

Using a little wit, 10 nimble fingers and asking the computer the right questions, French promises the amateur sleuths not only will be able to become more logical thinkers, but might also be able to solve the most notorious "who dunnit" cases.

"The intent of the Jack-the-Ripper program is not for it to become a teaching tool as much as a way of self-help, to give the individual better reasoning skills, a better ability to pick out facts from what they read," French said.

"We've taken this abstract subject matter — philosophy — and tried to find ways in which it can be put to practical use and I think we've really hit on something that's potentially going to be one of the most interesting things that we can produce out of philosophy this year," French said.

The computer caper has been taken to several workshops and has received rave reviews. Several companies have asked about producing and marketing the disks for which, French said.

The Ripper game — which took about two years to research, program and debug — is only one of three problem-solving computer games being developed by philosophy students, who are supported by foundation grants, French said.

Mystery author reveals Texas past

AUSTIN (AP) — The city of Houston with hardly any mosquitoes?

It was so in the summer of 1837, said a visitor to Texas.

Scholars say the written observations by the unknown visitor remain the best description of Texas during its first year as a republic — an independent nation of southerners and storekeepers and soldiers who "not only fought but drank in platoons."

The account first appeared as "Notes on Texas" between September 1838 and April 1839, in a monthly literary magazine, Hesperian, published in Columbus, Ohio.

The University of Texas Press published the material in 1958 as a hard-cover book, "Texas In 1837." It was edited by former Rice University professor Andrew Forest Muir, whose footnotes complement the text. The book was reissued in paperback in 1961 and again this year, 19 years after Muir's death.

Texas bookman John Jenkins calls the book "... an unparalleled description of the Texas republic in its infancy, often with keen insight and humor."

Muir says in the book's introduction he regrets that he had been unable to identify the author but

"The city of Houston, during the summer, could not have been said to be infested to any great extent with the mosquito; what few there were were confined to the banks of the bayou."

—Texas visitor in 1837

provided from "internal evidence" deduced the following about the mystery guest: His surname probably began with R; he was young; probably a resident of Cincinnati; certainly was a southerner; must have lived in Pulaski, Tenn., before moving to Ohio; and must have been a Baptist.

He also had at least a secondary education — and was perhaps a lawyer. Muir noted that the use of "stamped" in the author's phrase "the flies had stamped our horses" antedated by six years the earliest usage recorded in the Dictionary of American English.

The author arrived at Galveston

Island on March 22, 1837, less than a year after the Battle of San Jacinto, and was aboard the outbound ship Phoenix on Oct. 5-6.

In his six-month visit to Texas, the author went up Galveston Bay, San Jacinto River and Buffalo Bayou to Houston, arriving some two months after the first lots were sold and first buildings put up. He lingered there for some weeks, Muir said, then set out for San Antonio, which had a population of 5,000. He appeared to have retraced his steps back to Galveston Island.

The city of Houston, "during the summer, could not have been said to be infested to any great extent with the mosquito; what few there were were confined to the banks of the bayou," the author wrote.

Muir, in a footnote, commented, "It was later said that during Houston's first summer there were so few mosquitoes in town that no mosquito bars were required. As the number of cisterns increased, so did the number of mosquitoes."

The author said linen tents were used for "groceries," and Muir noted, "Groceries, according to the then current usage, were liquors and also places where they were sold."

Indeed, the author said, "Nothing was regarded as a greater violation of established etiquette than for one

who was going to drink not to invite all within a reasonable distance to partake, so that the Texans being entirely a military people not only fought but drank in platoons."

A liberty pole was put up in Houston on the first anniversary of San Jacinto, the author wrote. Muir said it was put up on Main Street, probably between Commerce and Franklin avenues. In February 1840, the city council ordered the pole moved to the courthouse square and prohibited the town from putting up poles anywhere other than on public squares, Muir said.

"Years later the surviving San Jacinto veterans in Houston carried a piece of the pole in San Jacinto Day parades, after which they made a round of saloons in which, by placing the log on the bar, they obtained free drinks," Muir said.

Also on the first anniversary of San Jacinto, President Sam Houston "added to his other merits" remained "perfectly sober" during a celebration dance, the author said. A Muir footnote, however, said "it seems that Houston did get drunk after the dance, for Benjamin Fort Smith, at whose inn there was a midnight supper following the dance, billed Houston for liquor and broken glasses at a champagne party on April 22."

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