

Professor Studies the Philosophy of Video Games
by Janette Ballard



Video gamers may be looking for adventure more than philosophy when they pick up a game controller, but they are increasingly being exposed to philosophical views and questions, according to Jere Surber, professor of philosophy.

Surber has been studying philosophy and pop culture (film, rock music, literature) since the early '90s. He learned about video games from his daughters, and “dived into gamer culture.” Before long, he discovered that there were more interesting philosophical issues and possibilities in video games than he had realized.

“One issue has to do with questions about the artificial intelligence of non-player characters, either your enemies or followers, whose behavior is controlled by the game program,” said Surber. “Another concerns the relation between avatars, the player's own representation within the game, and the concept of self-identity.”

“Video games have become increasingly philosophically sophisticated, not only in the evermore complex issues that they present, but also in revealing their own explicit and reflective awareness about philosophical issues,” he said.

Surber's first step in sharing some of his discoveries was to develop an undergraduate course entitled Philosophy and Video Games. At first it was a standard classroom course, but he soon found that it worked better as a completely online class, and he has been teaching it online for several years.

“In the last five years or so, I've been experimenting with teaching hybrid and online courses. Though I was skeptical at first, I've found that for certain types of courses, this format may be more successful than standard classroom courses in engaging students in the activity of philosophical reflection and critical thinking,” said Surber, who has taught at DU since 1974.

Surber is developing two more online courses, Extreme Philosophy and Philosophy of Technology, which will be available next academic year. He stresses, however, that the online format doesn't work for every class.

“I don't think that format should ever replace an active face-to-face encounter dealing with the texts of Plato, Kant, significant works of literature, or discussions of important ethical or political issues,” he said.

With the success of the Philosophy and Video Games course, Surber recently signed a contract with Bloomsbury Press for a book to accompany it.

“The book, provisionally entitled *The Philosophy of Video Games*, will consider not only how philosophical issues are presented in video games but also ways in which this medium poses new questions for philosophy itself,” said Surber. “Ultimately it explores the possibility that video games might represent an entirely new medium for expressing and exploring philosophical views and questions.”

Surber has a PhD from The Pennsylvania State University/Rheinische Universität-Bonn, where he studied under Professor Gottfried Martin in Germany at the University of Bonn. He wrote his dissertation on the problem of language in German idealist philosophy, and that continues to be one of his major areas of research and publication. His book, *What Is Philosophy: Embodiment, Signification, Ideality*, examines the most basic sources, and unanswered questions, of philosophy.

He currently is the chair of the philosophy department and teaches courses on Kant, Hegel, aesthetics and issues in contemporary philosophy. Outside of academics, he is a multi-instrumentalist in various Celtic-rock and bluegrass bands in the Denver area, and occasionally finds the time to sneak away to “game world.”