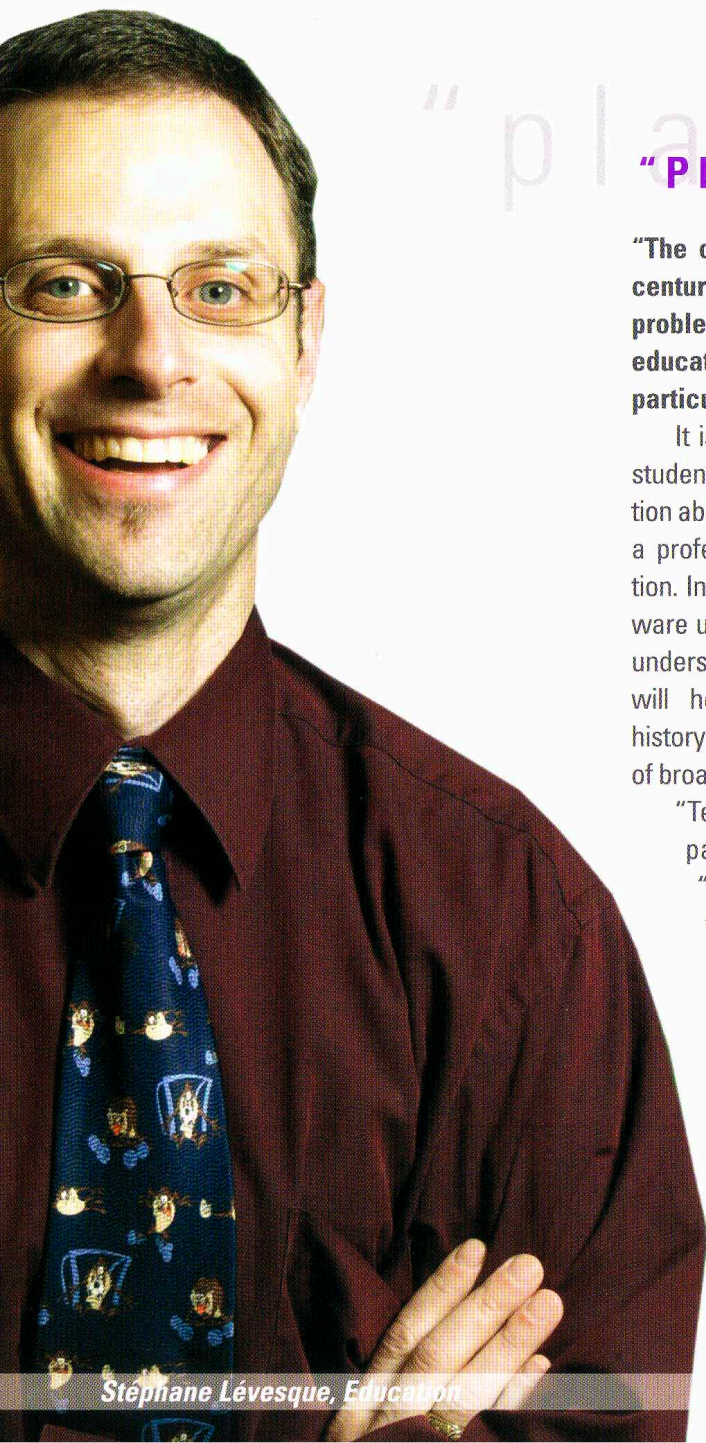
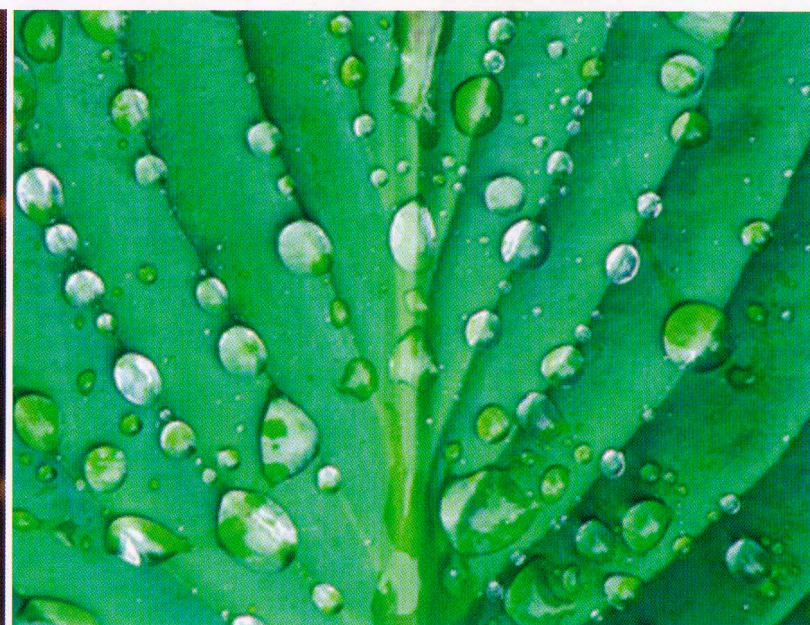
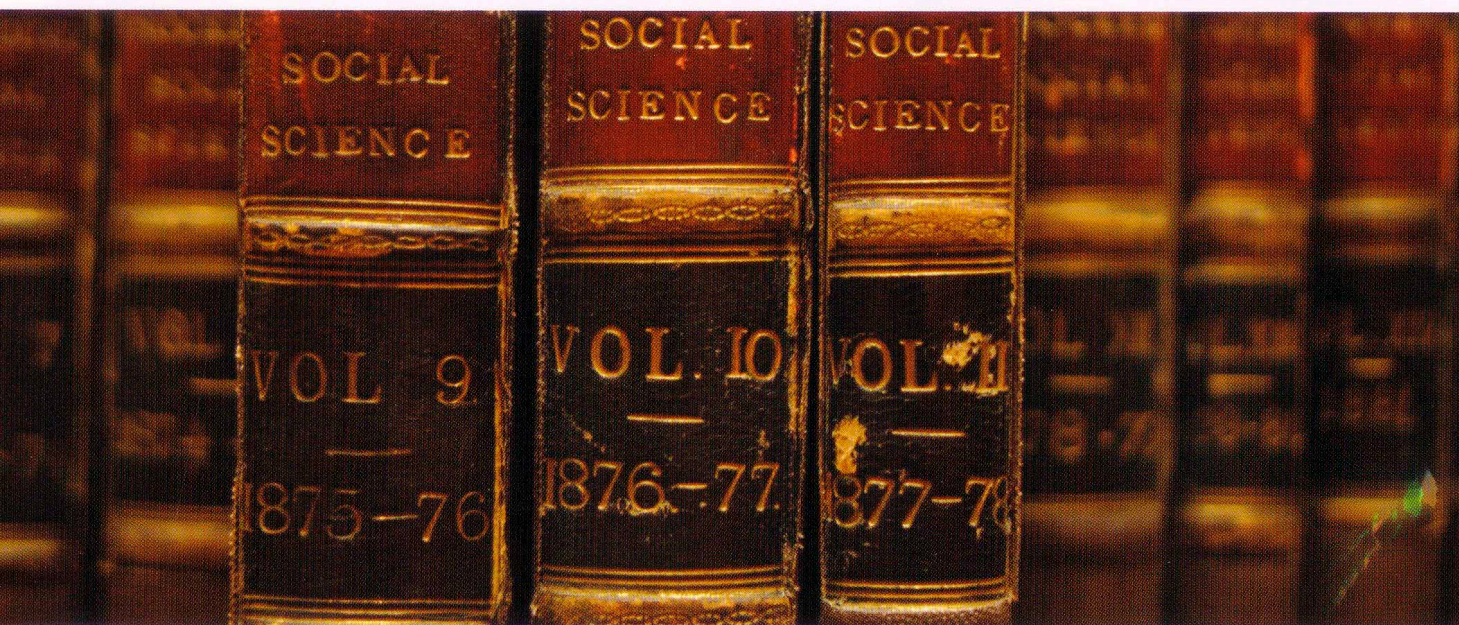


# researchwestern

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO

spring : summer 2005



## "PLAYING" WITH HISTORY

**"The computer is the symbol of the 20th century," says Stéphane Lévesque. "The problem is how we use computers for education – the social sciences, and particularly history, are falling behind."**

It is ineffective to simply provide history students with obscure chronological information about people and events, says Lévesque, a professor in Western's Faculty of Education. Instead, he has developed a novel software used to help teach concepts for better understanding the past. The *Virtual Historian* will help students think critically about history and develop their own understanding of broader historical themes.

"Teaching kids a great story about the past is no longer sufficient," he says. "They need different tools to successfully face 21st century challenges." Established methods of teaching and learning are being challenged by the acceleration of history, and by how mass media has increased its accessibility. "We need to get students to use history in a different way," Lévesque says. "In chemistry, you don't just read about it in a book—you 'play the game'."

This is where the *Virtual Historian* fits in. The Web-based program will be interactive and will allow students to develop techniques for learning history by having them track down clues, make decisions and develop their own interpretations of historical events – much like a detective caper. "We learn far better and more successfully if we 'play the game' instead of being told about the game," says Lévesque.

Primary and secondary sources – including recently declassified documents – within the *Virtual Historian* provide first-hand accounts of history and provide clues as students attempt to 'solve the case'. Archival film footage and artifacts presented in three-dimensions further bring the stories to life. Digitization has played a tremendous role in increasing accessibility to such historical documents as newspapers, letters, images and artifacts. "Historical literacy is still important," says Lévesque, "but you need to understand how to play with it."

The first case developed for the *Virtual Historian* delves into the October Crisis of 1970 and poses such questions as: "Was Prime Minister Trudeau justified to invoke

the War Measures Act?" Students will work through a series of online scaffolding questions and study the relevance of various sources to develop their own sense of the event before preparing a final essay.

Lévesque will develop similar pivotal cases in Canadian history and some that are more region-specific. "There has been a consistent master-narrative in the U.S. but not so much here," he says. "How is it that we teach Canadian history in Québec, B.C. and Ontario, and they don't match up?" All cases will be developed to accommodate each province's Ministry guidelines for evaluation and curriculum, and will also be provided in both English and French.

Lévesque is hoping the symbol of the 20th century will help us learn about the past, while also carrying us forward into the future: "Kids don't connect if they don't know where you're coming from," he says. "Historians don't always make the past relevant, and for legitimate reasons. As educators, however, we need to make it useful, pertinent and relevant for today and tomorrow."