JURIVISION'S 'SUPREME COURT EXPERIENCE'

ÉTIENNE TRÉPANIER

Étienne Trépanier is a lawyer, filmmaker and multimedia creator. A graduate of the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa (LL.L. 1996, LL.B. 1997), he was called to the Quebec Bar in 1998. He joined the federal Department of Justice where he first practiced as a litigator and then worked at Canadian Heritage focusing on communications and entertainment law. In addition to his career as a lawyer, Étienne produces film projects, including travel documentaries for distribution in Quebec and Europe. He joined uOttawa's Civil Law Section in 2020 to launch the Jurivision.ca platform, a visual legal advocacy initiative for knowledge mobilization. He also teaches the Visual Advocacy/Law and Cinema experiential course in which he introduces law students to the production of visual advocacy multimedia projects for awareness, knowledge mobilization or persuasion. He also teaches Federal Legal Practice, a course to introduce law students to the diversity of legal careers in the federal public service.

Étienne Trépanier spoke with Randy Boswell, guest editor of this edition of Canadian Issues/Diversité Canadienne*, in October 2025.*

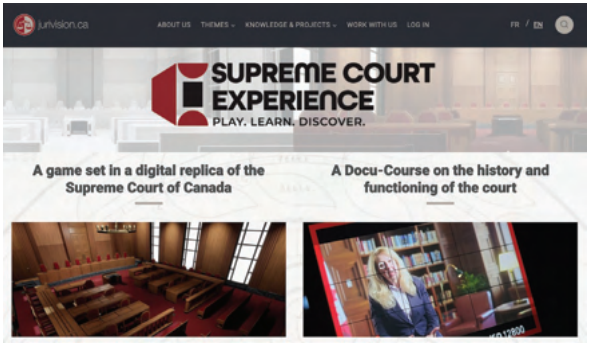
The 150th anniversary of the Supreme Court of Canada is a major milestone that has us thinking about its history. The Jurivision online portal's "Supreme Court Experience" project certainly has historical components, but it's also futuristic in nature. It includes both a docu-course and – I quote – an "interactive virtual experience in the form of a video game" that "allows Canadians to immerse themselves in a digital, realistic environment that recreates the iconic Supreme Court of Canada building." Could you tell me about the emergence of Jurivision, the "Supreme Court Experience" and what this is all about?

I guess I need to talk a bit about my background. So, I'm a lawyer – graduate from the University of

Ottawa – and practiced for the Department of Justice for 25 years as a litigator and in legal services... But I had a filmmaking practice on the side. So, I did travel films. I did a couple of short documentaries for the Franco-Ontarian schools here in the region. I did little projects, until I thought, you know, it'd be a good idea to use audio visual as a means of communication for the law...and to take the knowledge in the brains of researchers, from the experience of practitioners, and even the lived experiences of litigants or citizens, and bring those stories, in a storytelling narrative, to the public through an audio-visual platform. So our home base is Jurivision.ca. But we have a YouTube platform – trying to reach people where they are...

If we want to build trust, people need to know about how these institutions work and what type of human experience are lived in these institutions. And if we can inspire a few of those young Canadians to either get involved – go into law or something, that's great – but that's not what it's about. It's about civic education. So in the game, you discover the building. And we call it 'Echoes of the Court' because you hear bits and pieces from individuals (whose lives are linked) to the court. And hopefully, this will raise awareness, and maybe people want to learn more and they'll go to the docu-course – 'Keys to the Court' we call it. You learn about the court through the testimonies of lawyers and judges, but also through the experiences of five litigants – five individuals who went to the Supreme Court, took their cases to the highest court in the land.

Canadian Heritage was very much interested in the reproduction of the Supreme Court and the gaming experience. For the law foundations, it was probably a bit too much to pitch. So, we said, well, we'll build a course. But it was a great, great opportunity



The online portal to Jurivision's Supreme Court Experience game and video-based docu-course, developed by a team led by University of Ottawa law professor Étienne Trépanier.

for those two worlds to connect at one point. In the video game, there are components that are drawn from the docu-course. In the docu-course, there's stuff that's drawn from the from the game.

You talk about this as a knowledge mobilization project, and that it's to engage not just university students in their studies, but also the broader public. Why do we need to have the broader public more engaged in this particular set of institutions – the Supreme Court and the broader justice system? There's perhaps a public appetite for crime news, which can include courtroom proceedings. But you're asking people to go a bit deeper into these institutions. Why do you feel that's an important mission?

I think there's currently a lot of misinformation and trust issues with our institutions – what they are, what they do. So there are two objectives. One objective was to create engaging tools to reach young people where they are, either at school, through their teachers... And second, publishing some of that content on those platforms where younger folks are.

Young Canadians don't watch TV anymore. They watch Youtube, Instagram and TikTok... The idea is to reach young Canadians in a format that could be more engaging to them than the traditional assignment on the Supreme Court that they may get in high school or college or university... We've been on TikTok with some advertisement campaigns, and I see the numbers – like 2,000 people from TikTok came on the site this week... It's the idea of occupying algorithms with smart stuff, instead of leaving the algorithms occupied by silly stuff.

You needed to have some buy-in from the Supreme Court, including judges who are members of the Supreme Court today, to gain access to the court's back rooms, to interview the justices themselves. It is a pretty cloistered institution for the most part. You had this idea. How did you make it work in terms of the buy-in from the Supreme Court players?

I think the connection with this educational institution, the University of Ottawa, helped a lot. Chief Justice Wagner graduated from the uOttawa law school. You know, each time there's a new justice at the Supreme Court, there's a welcome ceremony here at the University of Ottawa. It's been going on for years. So there is a special relationship between the university and all justices of the Supreme Court. In fact, when we did the launch event here, eight of the nine were present.



One of the highlights of the Supreme Court Experience is a rare glimpse of Canada's Supreme Court justices in the deliberation room prior to a hearing.

When I initiated this idea, at first they looked at me and said, 'You're a bit wild.' But at the same time, they were looking for some type of outstanding legacy for the 150th anniversary. The game they weren't sure about. But because I understood the institution so well, I think, I was able to express the project in a way that was reassuring and that wasn't compromising. I'm from that world. I'm a lawyer.

The Supreme Court itself is in a moment where they're thinking about public outreach in a way that they may not have in the past – where they, too, recognize the need to reach out to make people more aware of what their institution is about. And I guess that coincides well with the anniversary. Can you discuss that?

Exactly – I think it's key. The Chief Justice, since he arrived, has done a lot of things to open the doors... We didn't get access to everything, but we got access to a lot more than we used to. There was a willingness to explain a bit more what the institution is about. You know, we see Parliament's question period all the time – but the Supreme Court, it's rare that you'll see it on TV. The Court accepted that we set up cameras in different spots to be able to show different perspectives of a hearing. They accepted that we film in the deliberation room. They weren't discussing an actual case. It was before the hearing, but it was still an openness to show how – before and after the hearing – (the justices) meet all together... I mean, obviously I'm a lawyer, so for me, it was very



The Jurivision project was supported by the Supreme Court justices as a legacy project to mark the institution's 150th anniversary.

interesting, but I think also for a non-lawyer – for people to understand that the judges are all humans. There is a human component that is very interesting coming out from this project – and that was one of our key objectives.

I looked at the interview with Rodney Small from Halifax, who challenged police racial profiling all the way to the Supreme Court and was acquitted in 1997. How did you go about selecting your case studies for deeper dives, even from the point of view of the appellant?

We had a regional objective – five different cases from different regions of the country. There was a diversity component. But beyond that, we had to choose stories that had a human component to it. I could have done something on the regulation of airplanes or whatever, but it would have been more difficult to get the human (story). It was very, very interesting to see how their Supreme Court experience was still impacting them today. Rodney Small is an example – the (social) work he does now is truly influenced by the lawyer who represented him.

There is considerable tension in this country around the degree to which our Supreme Court judges are driving lawmaking or social change through 'judicial activism.' Could you tell me how you approach this through the project – things that are controversial about the Supreme Court, including the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a contentious topic in our political landscape?

For me, it was obvious that we had to deal with this. The project is an uOttawa project. It's not the Supreme Court's project. But at the same time, we had to strike a balance. So we asked the question to the Chief Justice. And we also asked the former chief justice, McLachlin, what was her view on this? And they provided interesting answers. Before the Charter, there was less judicial activism... The court itself doesn't seem to be hiding from the critiques...

There was a less glamorous era for the court – even some decisions that were taken – for the Japanese (internment), for example. We address these in our docu-course because these sorts of decisions are part of the Court's history.[1]

Why do you think it is that we as a country, generally speaking, we know actually very little about the key figures in the Supreme Court's history and the current justices?

It's always amazing to see how the judges can walk in the Byward Market and everything, and you

1 Note: One video in the docu-course recounts the Supreme Court's upholding of the Canadian government's internment of more than 22,000 Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. Judicial history expert Emmett Macfarlane comments in the episode: "It's one of these black marks on the Supreme Court's history from a civil liberties perspective.

can cross paths with (Justice Mahmud) Jamal, or whoever – it happened to me – and he's alone and walking with his coffee, and nobody's bothering him. I guess that's Canada, and we're happy it's like this. I think our justice system, by not having the politicized aspect like the U.S., our judges are very much less exposed to the camera. There still seems to be a high level of trust towards the institution – but this could change.





Jurivision founder and uOttawa law professor Étienne Trépanier (left) said it's typical of the low public profile of members of the Supreme Court of Canada that he's observed Justice Mahmud Jamal (right) strolling around Ottawa's Byward Market unrecognized as one of the country's top judges.