Oh, What a Creative Web We Weave, When First We Practice to Perceive
(apologies to Sir Walter Scott)
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Having students read literature in the twenty-first century is taxing at best. Today's students are constantly bombarded with instant gratification and byte-sized chunks of data in a digital format; picking up a classic work of fiction and digesting it slowly is a passé pastime. One way that I've been able to merge the two worlds is through media projects where students are asked to identify with a specific character of a major work (novel or Shakespearean play) and connect him or her with the modern world of technology and instant information. Various projects I've assigned include making a soundtrack with songs identified thematically with the characters, multi-media comparison presentations where characters are connected with modern interpretations, and crafting a "mock" website for an identified character. It is the latter project that I wish to share at this time.

My grade 11 class studies *Macbeth*. After working through the play, interpreting it, and analyzing it, I then introduce the website project. Students should be quite familiar with the content and characterization at this point and can then synthesize a creative and insightful project.

In a nutshell, each student is required to construct a personalized hypothetical website as if he or she were one of six proffered characters. I stress to the students that it is not a "bring the character to our time" but rather what would the character do if this technology had been at his or her disposal in their time period. As would be expected, creativity is strongly encouraged.

There are four basic pages to the website: introduction, biographical data, how-to, and blogging. The content of these pages deals with character and plot analysis, meeting English curricular goals. Within the pages are components that are consistent with real websites; each page has an imaginative title bar, a hypothetical ad that links uniquely with the studied character, and a photo/clip-art element. The final product is submitted electronically for evaluation.

The joy of this project lies with its creative and technological diversity; students work at their own levels of technological expertise. It is for this reason that I stress the fact that this is a "mock" website – so that students aren't intimidated with the possibility that they will need to learn, in a few short days, how to make a real website with detailed coding. Once the student has completed the planning stage on paper, he or she proceeds to the computer lab where a variety of options reside. A basic starting point for them is Microsoft PowerPoint to create a basic four-slide presentation, with each slide being one of the pages. Adding internal hyperlinks is also an option for them, allowing for a detailed website with more than four slides. Another software option is Microsoft Word or Corel WordPerfect where the final product can be saved as HTML and viewed as such. Microsoft Publisher is yet another software program students have used, affording them greater editing capabilities. Students who are quite comfortable with technology have the option to create a real website from scratch, using a page-builder program, or drafting a

website with a working URL on-line at a free hosting site. There are a plethora of options for this assignment, allowing each student to maximize his or her technological potential.

Going beyond the basic construction, students then have the opportunity to use different creative software like MS Publisher or Adobe Photoshop to create the title bars, ads etc. These can be as simple as textboxes or as complex as detailed animations. Although music isn't required, lately I've noticed many students embedding .mp3 files into their sites to add incredible depth to the tone of the website. Sound bytes and emoticons are also an interesting "addition" that add realism. As this is a personal website of a key character, photos of that character can be gleaned from Google images, or rendered from a digital photography session; some students have even sketched/painted images and then scanned them to add to the depth/diversity of their project. Needless to say, this is just the tip of the iceberg – I am pleasantly surprised on a regular basis by the unique work presented by my ingenious students.

Evaluating the work is done with a rubric that is provided for students with their planning package. The rubric evaluates content/interpretation, creativity, and presentation. If the criteria are met, a student with a basic four-slide PowerPoint website could effectively achieve the same mark as a student who created an HTML document. Going above and beyond is generally rewarded with some extra-credit.

I have used this project to successfully integrate multiple forms of technology into my lesson plans and and to meet provincial curricular goals. It also allows me to truly evaluate my students' interpretation of the characters in *Macbeth*. I've also enjoyed positive reactions from the majority of my students.