

Bringing *Inanimate Alice* to life in the classroom

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One of the most intimidating things I learned as a student teacher was that the presence of technology in the Australian secondary classroom was unavoidable, and on my first placement I was

thrust head-first into the experience. I had never taught a lesson before, had only planned one theoretically at university, and not only was I nervous with anticipation with just how I would accomplish what seemed like a task reserved only for my imagination and for 'real' teachers, I became exceedingly apprehensive when my supervising teacher told me that her Year Seven English class were working with a digital novel titled *Inanimate Alice* and that it was time for me to take the reins to engage them with 'Episode Three: Russia'.

My initial introduction to *Inanimate Alice* was a frenzied, disjointed and diverse explanation from a group of students whose intention was to inform, but whose achievement was to confuse and frighten. "It's about a girl, but we don't really know who she is", "Alice is an annoying weird girl who moves around the world", and "It's strange – we love it!"

"What does she look like?" I asked in ignorance.

"We don't know."

(contains teacher resources)



Screenshot of the Inanimate Alice website: <http://www.inanimatealice.com/>

"What is the story about?" I asked again, hoping for more information.

"Um...we can't really say."

I looked at these students with ignorance and reticence.

Now I was really quite frightened; not only had I never even *heard* of a digital novel, in retrospect I was not even able to form a logical expectation for what one might actually look like. I imagined words – lots of words – and images to accompany them. On reflection I suppose that I assumed that a digital novel would be a picture book in the form of a digital document rather than a printed text that one would hold, turning the pages with each new development. The further I considered this idea, the more concerned I became with one primary factor: how does a *whole class* of Year Seven students, with varying abilities, differing learning needs and a colourful assortment of interests and personalities all read a digital text *at the same time*?

It seemed unlikely to me that this could actually work, however the assurances of the teacher and the clear interest expressed by the students themselves told me otherwise. So came the time that I set out to experience *Inanimate Alice* for myself in preparation for what I anticipated to be a daunting and somewhat intimidating experience, and what I actually did experience is representative of exactly how ignorant I was.

Meeting Alice

The night I met Alice was one which turned my newly developed understandings of technology within the context of learning upside-down, and led me to re-evaluate my appreciation for what literacy in the English classroom actually looked like. The *Inanimate Alice* Homepage immediately demonstrated to me that this resource would indeed present to me far more than simply a textual narrative with some accompanying images. From initial impressions, one can clearly see that the story of *Inanimate Alice* takes place within four chapters and within four different nations, however on further investigation it achieves much more than this.

The narrative told within the four chapters that have been produced to date explores not only the life, the story, and the experiences of Alice, but also her inner journeys as she grows from a young girl of eight years of age into a young woman in her twenties. Although I was going to be teaching based on the content of the third episode, which takes place in Russia, I started at the beginning in order to develop a similar relationship with Alice to that which the students in my class had already established. My understandings of what a digital novel comprises were transformed immediately. *Inanimate Alice* provides so much more than pictures and words; it offers an experience like no other and in no way resembling to what I had imagined. My concerns that such a resource would present difficulties in a diverse classroom were quashed immediately as I was drawn into a world of visual, auditory, sensory and emotional intrigue.

Inanimate Alice is told from the narrative perspective of Alice, with whom it is easy to see how a class of thirty students had become so attached in just two episodes. While text is an integral component of this narrative, it is by no means a solitary communicator of meaning; vivid and subtle imagery, enriching music and curious sound-effects work together with the text to establish an atmosphere within each episode that draws you into the curious life of Alice as her many worlds are explored with such intrigue and mystery as to consistently instigate conjecture as to who Alice is, where she is from, the role of her parents and the reason for her movement around the globe for the purpose of her father's occupation.

The relationship between this young girl and her parents, John and Ming, is shrouded with mystery

and clouded with intrigue. While we are given subtle clues as to the personalities, occupations and relationships within this small family, so much is left to the imagination. Here lies one of the most noteworthy aspects to *Inanimate Alice*: the emotions that are interwoven into the story. It is remarkable how the quite subtle imagery and sound combines with the minimal inclusion of text to establish such a strong and emotive experience.

Often humorous and at times quite eerie, sometimes even frightening, *Inanimate Alice* does not fail to keep the viewer interested, engaged and wanting more. Most notably, there is a strong desire to really *know* Alice, even at such times as her behaviour and attitudes can be frustrating (here is where I learned why some of the students referred to her as a "weird little girl"). However, *Inanimate Alice* is not simply a narrative about a young girl and her family, it also explores the inner character of Alice with such skill that – while we do not know where Alice is from, what she looks like, or anything beyond the very basic about her life – we are drawn into the very core of her personality through a skilful and very personal portrayal of the inner workings of her thoughts. As well as the textual, visual and auditory aspects of this digital novel, it does not take long for the viewer to discover the important role technology has to play not only in viewing the text, but also in forming a relationship with Alice herself.

From the first episode to the last, a central character in the narrative of *Inanimate Alice* is that of Brad, a digital avatar that Alice herself describes as having created herself. Although we are directly told that Brad is just a graphic image, as the story grows so too does Alice's relationship with this 'imaginary' friend, which adds further mystery and intrigue for the viewer as the two seemingly interact on far more than just a digital and imaginative level. The viewer is left either questioning the fictional existence of Brad or the psychological stability of a young girl who interacts with him. Either way, this relationship provides a wonderful opportunity for classroom discussion and engagement.

In addition to Brad, Alice also demonstrates her interest in the gaming world by creating interactive games that are incorporated into the narrative, and as the story progresses so too do her abilities and the complexity of her creations. The games become a more integral component to the evolution of her stories as this digital novel transforms from being an experience of viewing and listening to one which actively engages the

viewer by necessitating the completion of her games in order to progress through the story. This again reflects the growth of Alice from a young girl into a young woman, demonstrating her developing maturity and skills as a game designer. The image of Brad, too, transforms with Alice's growth as a digital animator, and in my own private viewing of *Inanimate Alice* I could see immediately that this would be an area worth exploring within the classroom context.

Previous ignorance in relation to digital novels abated, I felt significantly more confident about bringing a learning experience based on Episode Three into the Year Seven classroom. However, having still never taught with technology, I wondered how one story which required the interaction of only one person would engage a classroom of thirty students. In watching Episode Three, I had moved through to the final stages of the story before I realised that the completion of the game Alice had invented was actually a requirement in order to progress to the end of the chapter, and as a result I had to re-visit much of the story to complete the task. It took me around forty minutes to complete the entire chapter. This is where my ignorance raised its ugly head again; I made the assumption that the game would seem as difficult and time consuming for a Year Seven student as it had done for me. How wrong I had been.

The much anticipated day had arrived; the laptop was connected, the projector turned on, and the chapter was loaded and ready to go. I made another assumption that I would have to choose someone to operate the story and assist them where needed, but I found that the students were happy to democratically elect someone who had not already held the much coveted position of *Inanimate Alice* operator, and whom was understood to be a gaming whiz. The engagement of this class during the viewing was an exciting thing for me to behold, as was the way in which the class supported, clapped and cheered the operator as he (with great speed and efficiency) progressed through the game Alice had created. From the room there was either silence, or there were gasps of surprise, groans of frustration and sighs of relief, and it was clear for me to see that these students had become as attached to Alice as I had.



Screenshot of the opening text in 'Inanimate Alice Episode 1: China'

Lesson One

NB: this lesson was facilitated by the regular teacher, but I became involved in discussions.

The students watched *Inanimate Alice*. Before it required any interactivity, students discussed the music and what they expected from the opening scenes based on what they heard. All of the students said it sounded scary, and that Alice was probably either stuck somewhere or fighting with her parents. I asked the students to pay particular attention to Brad, what he looks like, at what times he comes into the story, and Alice's relationship with him.

The episode was paused at intervals to discuss setting, narrative and imagery that provided the viewer with a sense of place. We also discussed Alice's father and what he did for a living, linking the family's escape at the end of the episode to the images of industrial Serbia.

There was also a focus on the ways in which the creators represent people without showing faces, in particular the face of the guard at the airport and the use of light in the car.

On further discussion about Brad, many of the students said they weren't sure anymore if he was made up after all, because he seemed to give Alice advice, however many of the students believed that Alice had too good an imagination and that he wasn't real at all. We discussed why Brad's was one of the very few faces we actually saw.

Lesson Two

The lesson began with discussion, where students responded to prompting questions about Alice's relationships with her parents and Brad. I wanted the students to focus their attention on Brad, and asked them to build arguments to support why they believed he either was or was not real, with

students working in pairs to come up with some points about their arguments. We discussed how Brad's image had evolved as Alice's skills as a designer improved, and I asked students about the difference between a real person, a character in a story, and an avatar. The discussion came back around to Brad, and the students discussed their arguments as to whether Brad was a character in this story, or an avatar.

Many students suggested that the image of Brad was imagined and created by Alice, but that there was a real person who the image 'represented'. This led excellently into the next activity which required students to consider the ways in which people represented themselves through the use of technology.

The students worked again in pairs or small groups to list some characters they knew of from television, books, movies etc., and then listed some places where a person might use an avatar. They shared their ideas, and a few students who were struggling between the difference between a real person and an avatar were able to understand the concepts through peer discussion and examples. One of the challenges for some was the idea that a Facebook photograph was not a 'real person', but simply a representation of that person.

When I knew that all students understood the concepts, I gave them each a sheet of paper that asked them to list some aspects to their own identities that they would happily share with others. The prompting questions on the worksheet asked them about their hobbies, interests, family, friends, school etc.

Next the students had to draw an avatar that they would use to represent themselves online.

Lesson Three

I collected the worksheets and avatars from the previous lesson and used the information provided to divide the class into groups of three/four, trying to place people with similar hobbies and interests in the same group.

I provided each group with a photograph based on this (for example, one group had an image of a man with an enormous gold nugget, another group a surfer, another had a soccer player scoring a goal) and their task was to work in reverse, imagining that this was an avatar and they were to create the personality. I also provided each group

with a large sheet of cardboard, pens, markers, glue and some blank paper, making it clear that every person had to contribute to the poster by writing on the paper and gluing it onto the cardboard. It was a risk dividing a class into groups that I didn't know very well, but they responded very well to the activity and many students who didn't usually work together found common ground in their interests.

The class was instructed to use first-person voice in their posters, which was a challenge for some so I wrote some prompting lines on the board for them to refer to, e.g. "My name is... I live... I am... I like... I have... I enjoy..." All of the students participated well; they moderated their own behaviour and regulated their time. My role was as facilitator as I moved around the room and discussed work with groups.

All students were aware that the posters would be presented and so paid particular attention to spelling, grammar and their use of colour and text size. They were all very imaginative and created some very complex characters and life-stories.

Discussion at the end of the lesson provided me with an understanding that they were all creating a person that they would like to be friends with, and whom they believed would represent in their own lives what Brad represented in Alice's life.

Lesson Four

This lesson was much the same as the last, with group's further working on their posters. Students were able to move into their groups with minimum disruption and begin working effectively with time-management in mind.

Lesson Five

NB: I only taught ½ of this lesson as their teacher had to give them an assessment notice

Students presented their posters to the class and their regular teacher, who was particularly proud of the participation of some of the more challenging students. They were all very supportive and encouraging in their feedback to each other, and some even asked questions about the characters that had been created as if they were real people.

Many of the students agreed that they felt attached to the characters they had created, which led to discussion about Alice's relationship to Brad. A few who had previously held the view that Alice

had too good an imagination started to understand how someone as lonely as she could find comfort in an “imaginary friend”.

We discussed what we might expect from future episodes of *Inanimate Alice*, and I asked students if they thought that Brad would become less important in Alice’s life as she grew older. Some believed he would, while others believed that his avatar, personality and involvement in Alice’s life would become more complex and detailed.

This was the last lesson I taught this class, but the posters are a feature on their classroom walls 😊

Links to the Australian Curriculum: English

Notes on Carly’s lessons by Kelli McGraw

I was impressed by how much language instruction and creative activity Carly Zandstra was able to plan for just 4-5 lessons, and wanted to provide some additional material at the end of this article to help teachers link the lesson content to the new Australian Curriculum for English (AC:E).

While Year 7 has traditionally been taught in Queensland *primary* schools, this Year level will soon be brought into high schools and taught within *secondary* English. This provides us with an opportunity to re-think how we **engage** our youngest student cohort with **innovative texts** that are **relevant** to their experience, and the set of lessons provided above are an example of this approach in action.

AC:E Content in lessons on *Inanimate Alice*

Content descriptors from the AC:E that are closely attended to in the lessons above include:

Language Strand Content

- Understand the way language evolves to reflect a changing world, particularly in response to the use of new technology for presenting texts and communicating **(ACELA1528)**
- Understand that the coherence of more complex texts relies on devices that signal text structure and guide readers, for example overviews, initial and concluding paragraphs and topic sentences, indexes or site maps or breadcrumb trails for online texts **(ACELA1763)**

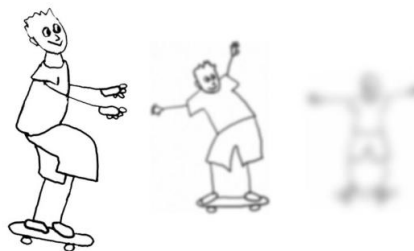
- Analyse how point of view is generated in visual texts by means of choices, for example gaze, angle and social distance **(ACELA1764)**

Literature Strand Content

- Reflect on ideas and opinions about characters, settings and events in literary texts, identifying areas of agreement and difference with others and justifying a point of view **(ACELT1620)**
- Compare the ways that language and images are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts **(ACELT1621)**
- Recognise and analyse the ways that characterisation, events and settings are combined in narratives, and discuss the purposes and appeal of different approaches **(ACELT1622)**

Literacy Strand Content

- Analyse and explain the effect of technological innovations on texts, particularly media texts **(ACELY1765)**
- Compare the text structures and language features of multimodal texts, explaining how they combine to influence audiences **(ACELY1724)**
- Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, selecting aspects of subject matter and particular language, visual, and audio features to convey information and ideas **(ACELY1725)**



Connect with the Alice teaching community

The creators and friends of *Inanimate Alice* have established spaces for teachers to collaborate and connect on **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **Edmodo**:

<https://www.facebook.com/inanimateAlice>

<https://twitter.com/inanimatealice/>

<http://www.edmodo.com/publisher/inanimatealice>

Teaching materials are also regularly uploaded on the **Promethean Planet** website (IWB resources) and on **Pinterest**:

http://community.prometheanplanet.com/en/user_gro ups/inanimate_alice/default.aspx

<http://pinterest.com/source/inanimatealice.com>

