



Teaching Electronic Literature: Classroom Application

'Inanimate Alice: electronic literature in educational and research context'

Novosibirsk State Technical University (NSTU) project, Russia

Commencing in 2017, the NSTU project is one of the first attempts in the Russian educational sphere to demonstrate how electronic literature can be adopted as a learning tool in university curricula. The project focuses on presenting *Inanimate Alice* (Episode 3: Russia) to Russian students together with guidance for their educators. This initiative helps Russian learners improve their multiliteracy and multimodality skills, competencies that are of crucial importance to everyone living in the 21st century.

The project involved more than 300 students in the foreign languages department at NSTU.



Coordinator:
Svetlana Kuchina

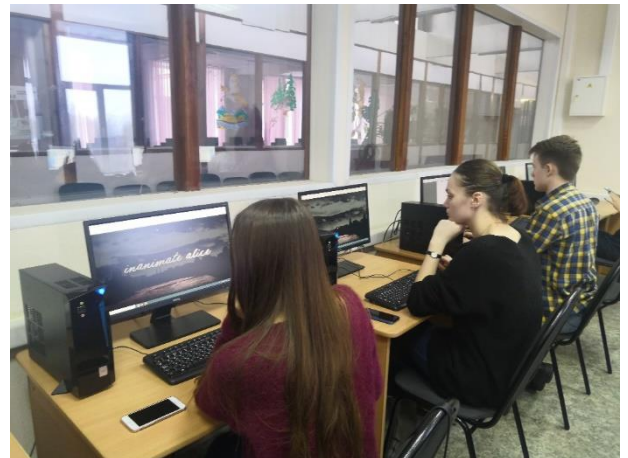
Associate Professor (History of Foreign Literature) in the Department of Foreign Languages (Faculty of the Humanities) at Novosibirsk State Technical University. She holds a PhD in literature theory with professional interests concentrating on contemporary literature process, electronic literature and e-poetry. Since 2013 Svetlana Kuchina has been a member of international Electronic Literature Organization, participating in Electronic Literature Conferences (Paris 2013, Porto 2017, Cork

2019, Aarhus 2021, Como 2022). Her current research projects focus on electronic literature theory, terminological issues of electronic discourse and electronic literature integration into the educational sphere.

"I came across the Inanimate Alice story long ago. It was about 2013, the time of the first ELO conference I visited. My first impression of the work - immediately liked it! Of course, I liked the design, colors, its very friendly interface, but primarily I appreciated the idea - a story about a girl who grows up with her reader. And it is not just a digital chapter book, but also consists of fully-fledged methodological material including Lesson Plans and Students 'resource pack' written by Jess Laccetti, based on extracts from different episodes of Alice's story. By that time, I had already been working at the University for more than 10 years, teaching students of the Humanities Department of literary history and EAP, consequently, it was important for me to find new opportunities, new learning tools, to help me teach more effectively and to motivate my students".

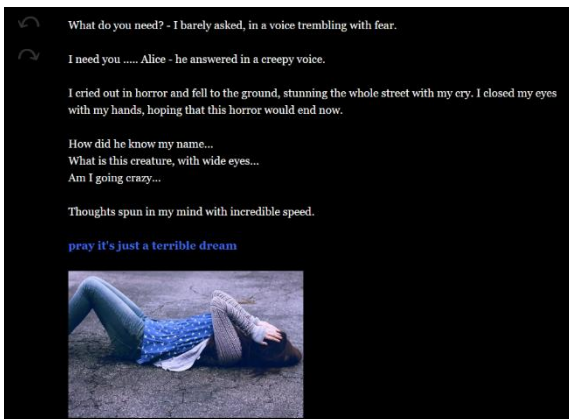
"In my opinion, the Inanimate Alice series is one of the most suitable electronic narratives to be integrated into the educational process. From the content perspective, it is interesting, as it touches on important issues (growing up, finding yourself, establishing social contacts, life in the digital age etc.), which are relevant for learners in this age group. Of great benefit is the fact that this resource does not require special technical skills in order to study it and students can access Inanimate Alice both in class and at home using a personal computer or mobile device. Most of all, it is attractive because of the opportunities arising from the Inanimate Alice series' style of production. It demands attention, both from a narrative point of view (in each new episode Alice gets older, changes location, where she goes with her family, expanding the range of topics that are discussed in the narrative), and from a technological aspect (from Flash to VR storytelling)".

The project comprised a three-week undergraduate module designed as a series of seminars on electronic literature analysis aimed at building traditional literacy and multimodal literacy skills with the help of electronic literature. The first week focused on the basic concepts of electronic literature and the structure of digital works; the second week was devoted to the close reading of a work of electronic literature (*Inanimate Alice: Episode 3*); the final week centered on critical reflection and the creation of multimodal narratives by students.



The project commenced with a questionnaire that was aimed at revealing some general knowledge on the topic of new media and electronic literature in both the English Language and Literature target groups. The questionnaire contained ten multi-select questions to be answered at home. It has shown us that more than 90 per cent of students from both groups were familiar with the term 'new media' as well as 'electronic literature' but lacked an understanding their concept meaning; they also did not differentiate digital and digitized literature; more than 65 per cent of both groups think that electronic literature is a kind of computer game and not as literature at all thereby neglecting its narrative potential.

The results of the survey showed that, before using digital artifacts as educational material, it is necessary to establish an active vocabulary of the basic concepts of electronic literature. We completed this task using a set of different types of interactive exercises (filling in gaps, multiple choice, matching, etc.), developed by the project team. I decided to schedule the assignments in such a way that all vocabulary training tasks and the reading of research papers on the topic were to be undertaken at home employing the just-in-time teaching strategy (Novak), which unites elements of the flipped classroom (Baker) with technological web-based assignments to create an active learning environment for students. As for classroom activities during the introduction seminar, I proposed that students complete mind maps defining the electronic literature and new media concepts. We concluded these seminars with an open discussion.



The next stage of the project (the second seminar) focused on the close reading analysis of ‘*Inanimate Alice* - Ep. 3. Russia’, where we discussed multimodal elements that are aimed at revealing the semantic content of the story, autobiography as genre etc. Here we used the schemes suggested in the “Lesson Plans and Students’ resource pack” authored by Jess Laccetti. The topics on homodiegetic, heterodiegetic narration and autobiographical genre in multimodal narrative were introduced to our literature class students, while an autobiography with music and sound was highlighted to the English class. Additionally, we also discussed the structure of

multimodal narratives in both groups. Usually, we started this seminar with a discussion asking “what are the key elements of a multimodal story?” We also tried to uncover the difference between music and sound and endeavoured to identify the main elements of the image structure (colour, size, graphics) that influenced the reader’s perception of the story. Then we moved on to the presentation of the *Inanimate Alice* series and continued with the reading of the story (Episode 3: Russia). As the project’s final assignment, participants were asked to create a sequel to Alice's adventures (2017-2019 project groups) and multimodal autobiography (2019-2021 project groups) in Twine.

As an extra task, the students were called upon to make a video-invitation, “Welcome to my school, Alice”. Since many of the ‘graduates’ of the project noticed that Alice felt scared while entering the Russian school despite liking it (about thirty-seven per cent of respondents mentioned the school episode in the questionnaire), I asked them to suggest their own interpretation of the school sequence. They went to the schools where they had recently attended, shooting short videos describing their school, showing the main school locations (gym, canteen, classrooms) and inviting Alice to go there. This was a multipurpose task aimed at building both speaking abilities and skills in creating a multimodal narrative.



On completion of the project, I received a lot of positive feedback from my students with many of them asking about continuing with the work and the possibility of participation in the next stages of

the project. However, for me, positive feedback was not a sufficient basis for evaluating the project results, so I decided to conduct a survey. The results demonstrated that: more than 80 percent of respondents noted that they understood the work and the significance of each multimodal component for building its conceptual meaning; more than 65 percent of respondents were able to verbalize the meaning of multimodal elements - to interpret the semantics of sound and color elements of the analyzed episode. Only 31 % of NSTU students were already familiar with the electronic narrative before the classes, but despite this, almost all of them (more the 80%) understood the essence of its concept. Over 75% showed interest in the topic and wanted to learn more about Alice's story and read all of the episodes.

Project developments were reflected in two articles in Russian pedagogy journals and in my report at the "Dialogue-2018" event (the conference on computer linguistics and technology, Russian State University for The Humanities, Moscow). In 2019, together with Alice's representatives – Series producer Ian Harper and Dr. Valerie Shinas (Principal Investigator, Lesley University, USA) – I took part in the Teaching Digital Literature Conference (TDLIC – 2019, Coimbra, Portugal) that was held at Coimbra University where Dr Ana Maria Machado, Dr Ana Albuquerque e Aguilar and other committee members organized this inaugural event for scholars and teachers around the world interested in the **integration of digital literature in national, local, or institutional curricula**. It was a wonderful opportunity to share my experience of working with digital literature in foreign language and literature classes, as well as to get acquainted with the experiences of my colleagues from other parts of the world.

In 2021 an international Alice team – Ian Harper (Series Producer, BradField Narrative Designs, Canada), Dr Valerie Shinas (Lesley University, USA), Dr Amanda Hovious (Emporia State University, USA), Dr Kyle Stooshnov (Spacious Mirror, Canada) and Dr Ana Maria Machado (Coimbra University, Portugal) – took part at the IX International Research and Practice Conference «Intercultural Communication: Linguistic and Didactic Issues» (Novosibirsk, Russia). It was a great plenary session on the topic of "ST&RT with Alice: A Multimodal Literacy Experience for Science and Technology Learning" where speakers discussed the benefits of teaching electronic literature and the pedagogies that support use of digital texts. The speakers received a lot of feedback and questions from grateful listeners. It was really useful for many teachers from Novosibirsk who seek new motivational opportunities for their students that are studying foreign languages with the help of digital technologies.



For myself, 2022 brought a fresh and inspiring opportunity to share the project results with the educational research community in the USA. Dr. Valerie Shinas kindly proposed that I join the panel discussion "A multimodal mindset: Examining 21st-century educational problems through a critical digital literacies lens" at the AERA's annual meeting. The panel discussion centered on the digital narrative, *Inanimate Alice*, digital literacies and other multimodal texts to support engaged, inquiry-

driven learning for all learners. It was an incredibly useful experience in international cooperation, for which I am most grateful to my colleagues. This opportunity allowed me to rethink some of the project results and present them in a new format at the ELO conference – 2022 (Como, Italy).

The project years 2017-2022 have deepened my acquaintance with the most interesting multimodal series *Inanimate Alice* (many thanks to Ian Harper who gave free access to project components) and incredible experience in working with multimodal electronic texts in teaching! I am thankful to all my colleagues from around the world for accepting me into their international team, for the inspiration they gave me, for our most interesting discussions, for their high professionalism, which influenced me a lot and helped me develop my competencies in teaching foreign languages and literature.