

# Teaching electronic literature in Russia: the NSTU initiative project

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to summarize the experience of carrying out the NSTU initiative project in Russia aimed at integrating electronic literature into the educational process in higher education. The project involved multipurpose research which included different curriculum subjects (English as a second language, literature and pedagogy). Its educational goal was to present a digital narrative to different categories of Russian students. Firstly, to Russian students who study literature in order to train their skills in literary text analysis. Secondly, the *Inanimate Alice* episodes were presented to those who study English as a second language in order to train their traditional language skills (reading and listening comprehension, speaking and writing) in English through a digitally created reading experience. The research goal was to analyze both types of experiences and present a strategy for digital literary text integration in the educational process in Russia.

## KEYWORDS

electronic literature; NSTU; Inanimate Alice; just-in-time teaching strategy; blended learning.

## ABSTRACT

Este artigo procura sintetizar a experiência de realização da iniciativa do NSTU na Rússia com o objetivo de integrar a literatura eletrônica no processo educativo no ensino superior. O projeto consistiu numa investigação multifuncional que incluiu diferentes disciplinas curriculares (inglês como segunda língua, literatura e pedagogia). O seu objetivo educativo era apresentar uma narrativa digital a diferentes categorias de estudantes russos. Em primeiro lugar, a estudantes russos que estudam literatura para desenvolver competências de análise de textos literários. Em segundo lugar, os episódios de *Inanimate Alice* foram apresentados àqueles que estudam inglês como segunda língua, a fim de treinar as competências linguísticas tradicionais (ler, escutar, falar e escrever) na aprendizagem de inglês, através de uma experiência de leitura criada digitalmente. O objetivo da investigação foi analisar os dois tipos de experiência e conceber uma estratégia para a integração do texto literário digital no processo educativo na Rússia.

## KEYWORDS

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Electronic literature has become widespread fairly recently. If we consider the phenomenon of electronic literature within this short historical retrospective, we can see that the first experiments in this field in Europe were associated with the name of Theo Lutz and his generative work - Stochastic Texte, which was created in 1959. Technological discoveries in the second half of the twentieth century were associated with the names of Vannevar Bush, Douglas Carl Engelbart, Theodor Nelson, which stimulated initiatives by artists in the field of electronic creativity. Electronic Networks and the Open Internet Environment enabled electronic literature to be published online and widely distributed.

In Russia, the National domain RU was created in April 1994, and in November 1994 the first full-text electronic library appeared, which was "Maxim Moshkov's library" (Moshkov), in which electronic copies of printed literary texts were placed. The first literary competition (which included nominations in electronic literature) was the "Teneta" competition (Kuznetsov, 2004) which also occurred in 1994. The competition successfully brought together the majority of Internet resources devoted to literature. Among the first participants were the famous Russian writers and poets Bakhyt Kenjaev, Dmitri Prigov, and Bayan Shiryayev. Initially, the "Teneta" competition was a non-commercial project, which led to some difficulties in the processing of such a huge number of competitive materials, resulting in the closure of the project in 2002.

Among the first online projects in electronic literature publication and distribution was "Kiberatura", combining an online literary magazine, an electronic library and a research laboratory (Netslova). Here we can find the works of the first Russian electronic literature authors, such as Alexander Ramazanov (Alexroma), Roman Leibov (the author of "Roman", the first hypertext novel in Russian), Dimitri Manin, Nikita Negin and others.

Despite the fact that at present electronic prose and poetry have already left the stage of experimentation and turned into fully-fledged artistic works, in the Russian context, they are mostly identified with the concepts "laboratory", "exhibition" or "festival". Among the largest and the most notable electronic literature and media poetry festivals are: "Pyataya noga" (media-poetry festival, which has been held in Russia annually since 2006);

“Intertext” (The 2015 exhibition of contemporary art at the Erarta Museum, St. Petersburg, which was dedicated to the relationship between text and visual image); “Digital poet” (The exhibition, which introduced video and 3D poetry, interactive installations and sculptures – among them the writer-robot “Cyber-Pushkin” – and a poetic-chair that enabled the perception of the lyrics of the Silver Age through the vibrations of the human body. It was held in Moscow in 2015 (Tolkacheva, 2015); “Image as a word. Media poetry as a method” (This exhibition was dedicated to the synthesis of new technologies and poetic art and took place in St. Petersburg, in 2016); the «Per-Forma 02” project (The project was dedicated to the merger of architecture, dance and text. It was held in Moscow, in 2018; at the Theatre of Nations); the exhibition “Body of text” (this was aimed at discussing ideas on new poetic language, channels of information perception, verbal and nonverbal signals, media poetry, text art, and meta-communication. The exhibition took place in Moscow, in 2018); the international festival of media poetry “101.Invisible connections” (St. Petersburg, in 2019).

Teaching digital literature involves a multidisciplinary approach to literary studies including the visual arts, media studies, and information technology. However, there is a significant gap between technological advancements of rapidly enhancing digital communications, digital arts (electronic literature as well) and teaching methodologies for the understanding of digital communication and integrating it within the educational environment. As Nicolaescu Madalina and Mihai Adriana asserted “the supra-departmental nature of digital literature and its institutional in-between identity runs against the discipline-based departmental model of most European academic institutions” (Madalina, Adriana, 2014). Alexandra Saemmer emphasized that “the ambiguous status of digital works, between literature, visual and performing arts, does not facilitate their integration into one specific discipline either. (...) Digital literature thus makes us dream about a university no longer divided into several disciplines but providing students with networks of skills” (Saemmer, 2010: 330). However, there have been several successful experiences of integrating electronic literature within the educational process in digital culture programmes alongside programmes concerning cultural and media studies, digital communication, and digital aesthetics (Koskimaa, 2010), (Wenz, 2010), (Gendolla, Schäfer, Tomaszek, 2010).

The NSTU project “*Inanimate Alice*: electronic literature in an educational and research context” is suggested as one of the first attempts in the Russian educational system to show how electronic literature can be adopted as a learning tool in university curricula. The project “*Inanimate Alice*: electronic literature in an educational and research context”, which I started in 2017 (fall term) at Novosibirsk State Technical University, is aimed

at presenting *Inanimate Alice* (Episode 3: Russia) and educator guidance to Russian students. The initiative helps Russian learners improve their multiliteracy which is of crucial importance to everyone who lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is worth emphasizing that this project was inspired by the Portuguese project “*Inanimate Alice: Translating Electronic Literature for an Educational Context*” which is coordinated by Ana Maria Machado (Machado), and involves two postgraduate students: Ana Sofia Aguilar and António Oliveira.

*Inanimate Alice* is an interactive, multimedia series that tells the story of a girl growing up dreaming of one day becoming a game designer. The story contains 7 episodes (2005-2018). The narrative, written by award-winning novelist Kate Pullinger, uses game-like mechanics and backdrops that encourage students to read, re-read and fully comprehend the story all the while thinking they are just having fun. Teachers around the world use the *Inanimate Alice* series for literacy, language acquisition and creativity objectives (*Inanimate Alice*).

The NSTU project is a multipurpose research that includes differing curriculum areas (English as a second language, literature, and pedagogy). The educational goal is to present a digital narrative to multiple categories of Russian learners. Firstly, to those who study English as a second language in order to improve their traditional literacy skills (reading/ listening comprehension, speaking and writing) through the digitally authored reading experience. Secondly, the *Inanimate Alice* episode is presented to Russian learners who study literature in order to develop their skills in literary text analysis. The research goal is to analyse both types of experiences and present a strategy for the integration of electronic literary texts into both university courses. The project involved 130 foreign language department students and two Master's degree students.

The project “*Inanimate Alice: electronic literature in an educational and research context*” is a three-week undergraduate module, taught in a literature course (the fall semester) and in the English as second language course (the spring term) since 2017. It is designed as a series of seminars on electronic literature analysis, as well as identifying multimodal narrative strategies, aimed at building multiliteracy skills and traditional literacy skills with the help of electronic literature. The first week focuses on basic concepts of electronic literature and the structure of digital works; the second week is devoted to electronic literature close reading (*Inanimate Alice*. Episode 3); the last week concerns critical reflection on the experience gained as a result of reading electronic literature. The module's weekly meetings are 1.5-hour seminars in a computer lab (for interactive exercises, mind-mapping tasks and workshoping).

The first group of project participants (who are studying literature) attended classes on the topic, reading *Inanimate Alice's* story in English, then participated in training exercises and discussed the project in Russian. The second group (who are studying English as a Second Language) attended classes on the topic in English.

This electronic literature integration model emphasizes the process of electronic literature reading and comprehension, rather than focusing solely on the end product. This is in line with Shelley Tracey's Model for Creative Reflection, with its four phases of *preparation* (enacting "threshold activities" that cross-reference known and new experiences); *play* (encouraging creative thinking, interpretative approaches for new ideas); *exploration* (purposefully putting these interpretations into a new project); and *synthesis* (in which "experience and learning are synthesized into new understandings") (Tracey: 5).

The project starts with a questionnaire which has the aim of showing general knowledge on the topic of new media and electronic literature in both target groups. The questionnaire contains ten multi-select questions and was supposed to be done at home. It showed us that more than 95 per cent of students from both groups are familiar with the term 'new media' as well as 'electronic literature' but lack an understanding of their conceptual meaning; they also do not differentiate between digital and digitized literature; more than 65 per cent of both groups think that electronic literature is a kind of computer game not literature as well, thereby neglecting its narrative potential.

After completing the questionnaire, the students from both groups are offered the chance to complete the set of differing types of interactive exercises (gap-filling, multi-select, matching etc.) developed by the project team. The exercises were aimed at building basic skills of electronic literature comprehension.

The curriculum only provides three classes per electronic literature module, so it was important to spend much more time on the construction of meaning rather than information transmission. The assignments are scheduled in such a way that all vocabulary training tasks and the reading of research papers on the topic were supposed to be homework as is usually set in a just-in-time teaching strategy (JiTT) (Novak), which unites elements of the flipped classroom (Baker) with technological web-based assignments to create an active learning environment for students. This approach is possible because each exercise from the interactive set contains a self-control option which also enables students to do these by themselves. Those who fail to complete the interactive tasks have an opportunity to consult with the teacher online and complete the exercises again after that.

Electronic Literature Introduction Seminars / 1 <sup>st</sup> week/ 2 academic hours	Inanimate Alice's Cloze Reading seminars / 2 <sup>nd</sup> week/ 2 academic hours	Electronic Literature Reading Reflection / 3d week/ 2 academic hours
<p><u>Pre-Classroom Activities:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Entrance Questionnaire</li><li>• Online exercises</li></ul> <p><u>Classroom activities:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Completing Mind Maps on the topic by using the <a href="#">Mindmeister</a> online service</li><li>• Open Discussion</li></ul>	<p><u>Pre-Class Activities:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Research papers' reading</li></ul> <p><u>Classroom activities:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discussion (multimodal narrative)</li><li>• 'Inanimate Alice' presentation</li><li>• Reading Log Task</li></ul> <p><u>Home assignment</u> (English class):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Student Autobiography Planner</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Blog Entry (Literature Class)</li><li>• Multimodal Autobiography Stories Presentations (English class)</li><li>• Autobiography Reflection handout (English class)</li></ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Final Questionnaire</li></ul>

Figure 1. NSTU initiative project: module structure.

As for classroom activities during the introduction seminar, the students from both groups were suggested to complete mind maps on the topic by using the Mindmeister online service for making mind maps (Mindmeister). This mind map service can easily be integrated into class activities. Registration takes just a few minutes and its basic option allows students to post and share five mind-maps for free. The task is to map two notions “new media” and “electronic literature” using five or more branches with several “leaves” on them. Then there is a session where every student presents his/her electronic literature concept and his/her part is usually finished with an open discussion. We try to find the “commons” in all mind maps presented during the class and as a conclusion work out the common definition of electronic literature. The small final test at the end of this seminar, which students complete in the classroom, provides an assessment of the acquisition level of basic concepts of electronic literature comprehension. This seminar has enabled us to establish an active vocabulary (both in Russian and in English) for students to study works of electronic literature. In addition, some of the concepts which form part of their active vocabulary before the project, such as ‘new media’ and ‘electronic literature’, receive appropriate connotations and are semanticized through examples used in authentic research literature. The Just in Time Teaching strategy provides time for active learning by shifting some of the learning activities to outside of the classroom and using class time to work cooperatively in groups.

The next part of the project contains the analysis of *Inanimate Alice*. Ep. 3. Russia. Here we use the lesson schemes that are suggested in the “Lesson Plans and Students’ resource pack” by Jess Laccetti. There are two lesson plans devoted to the Russian section. We do not follow the exact plans, instead giving particular emphasis to the topics within them. As such, the topic on homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration and the autobiography genre in multimodal narrative are suggested to our literature class students,

while an autobiography with music and sound is highlighted for the English class; furthermore, we also discuss the structure of multimodal narratives in both groups.

As for pre-reading resources for the literature class, the students are suggested to become acquainted not only with “Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative” (passage 3.1.5 on homodiegetic narrators) by Manfred Jahn (Jahn), as outlined by Jess Laccetti, but also with some extra research: “Narratology” by Wolf Schmid (paragraph # 4 about the narrator) (Schmid) and “Multimodality, a Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication” by Gunther Kress (Kress) in order to get a closer look at the structure of modes and the notion of mode itself, the figure of the narrator in fiction, with its explicit and implicit features.

The objectives of this class were:

- Identify and become familiar with narratological terms such as homo and heterodiegetic narrators;
- Become familiar with the term mode and identify mode types;
- Examine the role of music/sound and image in the story;
- Perform a close reading of *Inanimate Alice*. Episode 3: Russia.

We started our second seminar on electronic literature with the discussion of mode and its definition, the types of narrators and examples of them from print literature. Then the teacher gave a short presentation about the “Inanimate Alice” series which allows students to learn about a girl growing up dreaming of one day becoming a game designer. Then they had twenty minutes to read the Russian episode of the story and we moved back to the analysis. We discussed what kind of features in this part of the *Inanimate Alice* series we could attribute as homodiegetic narrative peculiarities and which modes they are represented by. We tried to identify which mode exactly is responsible for the specific “mood” of this or that part of the story and if there were any kind of correspondence between the specific emotion being expressed in the electronic fiction and the mode (sound/graphics/animation) representing it. Then the students were given the *Reading Log Task* from Jess Laccetti’s resource pack and, working individually, had an opportunity to move back to Alice’s story once again. While completing the *Reading Log* sheets, they were tasked to verify all their ideas about the representation of modes in the homodiegetic electronic narrative. The *Reading Log task* was posted in my teaching blog (AUTOR) and the students finished this task at home by posting their *Reading Logs* in response to the message in my blog.

The third seminar for this group was devoted to electronic literature reading reflection. It took place online due to the peculiarities of the university calendar for this month. Students received detailed instructions from Jess Laccetti's pack on how to write a short blog (or journal) entry and describe their reading experience, answering five key questions (What I did; What I enjoyed; What I found difficult; What really worked; What I will do when it comes to reading the next episode).

As for the close reading seminar for the English class students, it was aimed at constructing a multimodal autobiographical essay in English, using images and sound effects. Again, I use the flipped classroom scenario for pre-reading activities. The students were supposed to read the research paper and interview indicated below before they started reading *Inanimate Alice*. Episode 3. These were the following:

- Robyn Jodlowski "The Relationship Between Text and Image. An interview with Kristen Radtke" ([Jodlowski];
- Gunther Kress "Multimodality. A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication" (Kress).

The objectives of this class were to:

- identify and become familiar with the narratological autobiographical strategy.
- identify the difference between music and sound effects; to examine how these modes work in relation to life stories.
- improve English grammar skills by using the Past Simple tense to narrate the story.

We usually started the class with a discussion, on what the key elements of a multimodal story are. We also discovered the difference between music and sound and tried to identify the main elements of an image structure (colour, size, graphics) which can influence the perception of the story process. Then we moved to the presentation about the *Inanimate Alice* series and continued reading the story (*Episode 3. Russia*). After reading the story we had a brief discussion on the topic, and I asked the students to work in pairs to complete the *Reading Log Task* which I had supplemented for this group. In the original *Reading Log Task* by Jess Laccetti there are only two columns devoted to the information and interpretation sections. I provided more detail to the information sector by dividing it into verbal, image, sound and graphical modes. Analysing the different modes in the multimedia story we tried



to identify which influenced them most or where there was a synergetic effect. Each group was supposed to make a short presentation of their *Reading Log*. As a home assignment I suggested students work independently on the *Student Autobiography Planner* from Jess Laccetti's pack. The task was to choose five events from their life (real or imagined), to write a short verbal description of them and to find images and sound/music effects that matched them perfectly.

The third seminar started with the multimodal autobiographical story presentations. Then we moved to the *Autobiography Reflection* handout and tried to analyse the students' personal experience in compiling the multimodal autobiographical narrative. This year I used the same module structure but enriched it with some creative activities such as the video-invitation "Alice, welcome to my school". Since many of the 'graduates' of the 2017-2018 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 topic. They went to the schools where they had recently finished, and shot short videos describing their school, showed the main school locations (gym, canteen, classrooms) and invited Alice to go there. It was a multipurpose task that was aimed at building both speaking skills and skills in creating a multimodal narrative.



**Figure 2.** NSTU initiative project: creative activity.

Since the project was integrated into the educational programme as an independent module, it had an autonomous assessment system with a weighting of 100/50 points (maximum/minimum) not taking into account points for other types of educational activities in the semester. I mostly im-

plement formative assessment for the seminars, because I need more diagnostic than evaluative data. This formative assessment provides ongoing feedback and allows me to improve and adjust the of electronic literature into the university curricula. The three assessments (which can be identified as summative because the information gathered is graded) consist of completing on-line exercises, a Reading Log Task and Blog Entry or Multimodal Autobiographical Story Presentations, depending on the curriculum.

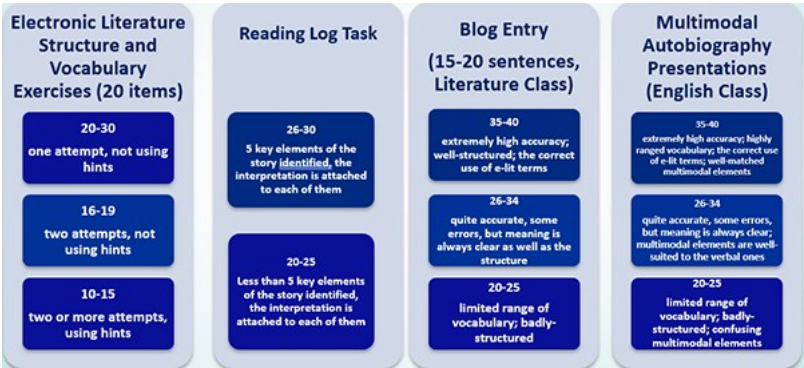


Figure 3. NSTU initiative project: assessment

As the final activity of the third seminar, I asked the students from both groups to fill out a questionnaire which helped me analyse their level of understanding and vision of the topic. According to the survey, most learners (87%) found that the electronic narrative was thrilling and a comprehensible resource because it included audio, video, graphic and animation components that helped the author to show the thematic content. Only 31 % of NSTU students were already familiar with electronic narrative before the classes, but despite this, almost all of them (more than 80%) understood the essence of its concept. Over 72% showed interest in the topic and wanted to learn more about Alice’s story and read all of its episodes. More than 65 % felt that electronic literature had been successfully integrated into the university curriculum through the Inanimate Alice reading experience.

As I have already stated, the project was multipurpose with not only its educational goal, but also its research goal. The project team designed the set of authored interactive exercises which aimed at establishing digital literacy skills; the results of these project stages have been described in two articles in Russian pedagogy journals and also in my report on “Dialogue-2018” (the conference on computer linguistics and technology, the Russian State University for The Humanities, Moscow) [AUTOR]. Considering the results of the questionnaires, written assignments (essays), mind maps, together with the project team we formulated several methodology principles

for the integration of electronic literature into the educational process at NSTU (English and Literature classes for undergraduate students). These are the following:

1. The integration of electronic literature into the educational process, regardless of the subject area, requires two stages, firstly, a theoretical one (where the key concepts of electronic literature are established); secondly, a practical one (where the concept of electronic literature is illustrated with the help of concrete examples).
2. The theoretical stage for the integration of electronic literature should contain not only the reading experience (reading the research papers on the topic and the comprehension tasks), but also a training option, based on interactive exercises aimed at electronic literature vocabulary building.
3. The electronic literature theoretical module should contain topics on electronic literature structure, semantics and main genres with examples.
4. The electronic literature practical module, devoted to the analysis of *Inanimate Alice. Ep. 3. Russia*, should in general be based on the “Lesson Plans and Students’ resource pack” by Jess Laccetti, but the students’ language competence, their readiness to be involved in the computer-mediated tasks and individual student peculiarities should also be taken into account.
5. The integration of electronic literature into the curricula of the NSTU bachelor degree programmes (linguistic and teacher training programmes) should combine elements of the flipped classroom with technological web-based assignments that reflect the Just in Time Teaching Strategy and be aimed at creating an active learning environment for students.

During the project we have held twelve seminars and are going to hold six more before our recommendations on electronic literature integration will be presented at the NSTU Foreign Languages Department methodology session. More than one hundred and thirty students have participated in the project.

The use of electronic literature as a teaching tool in university curricula calls for an integrated approach which supposes building not only traditional literacy skills such as reading/writing comprehension but also awareness of video, image, sound manipulation, and HTML coding. Such an integrated approach is difficult to implement in a highly tailored uni-

versity course, whether this involves teaching literature theory or learning a foreign language. One of the possible solutions to this problem is the use of blended learning technology which can shift some of the training materials out of the classroom, making them the part of pre-class activities. The web-based assignments are the heart of this strategy because they cause students to think about the upcoming lesson, as well as answer a few questions prior to the class. At the same time, it is worth noting that eliterature is a universal learning resource that can be adapted to many courses within university programmes. Electronic literature as learning material not only offers students the opportunity for knowledge exchange in terms of both culture and information, but also expands their motivation for learning and the sharing of their experiences.

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