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Inanimate Alice

"Born Digital"

AMANDA HOVIOUS

A "born-digital novel"—those words describe *Inanimate Alice*, an award-winning transmedia storytelling project.

Inanimate Alice marries text with sound, movie, and gaming elements to create an experiential story that invites readers to take part in the world of Alice Field, a globe-trotting girl who wants to be a game designer when she grows up. The project represents a new genre in literature and has captured the imagination of teachers and students worldwide. It offers an innovative approach to twenty-first-century learning and literacies.

Remarkably, the original purpose of Inanimate Alice was not educational in nature. The project's original intent was to create a backstory for a movie, a movie that has not yet come to fruition. The genius behind the story came from series producer Ian Harper. Award-winning author Kate Pullinger and cutting-edge digital artist Chris Joseph brought


the tale to life. The story itself was created to be told through ten episodes, six of which have been produced or are in production.

Alice Field, a budding game designer, is an only child. Alice is lonely because her father works in the oil industry, which requires moving his family from job to job around the world: China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, England. To combat loneliness, Alice creates an imaginary friend named Brad to keep her company and make her feel safe. Fear and safety, stemming from the dark and sometimes dangerous undertones of her father's job, are recurring themes throughout each episode.

Alice grows older in each subsequent episode. In Episode 1, she is eight years old. By Episode 4, she is fourteen. To reflect her age and growing maturity, the episodes become increasingly complex in story line and gaming elements.

FROM ENTERTAINMENT TO EDUCATION

Across the globe, teachers have incorporated Inanimate Alice into their classrooms. Students have fallen in love with Alice's character. In Australia, Education Services Australia invested in Inanimate Alice to develop educational materials including Alice's School Report, available through ISSUU. In the United States, AASL
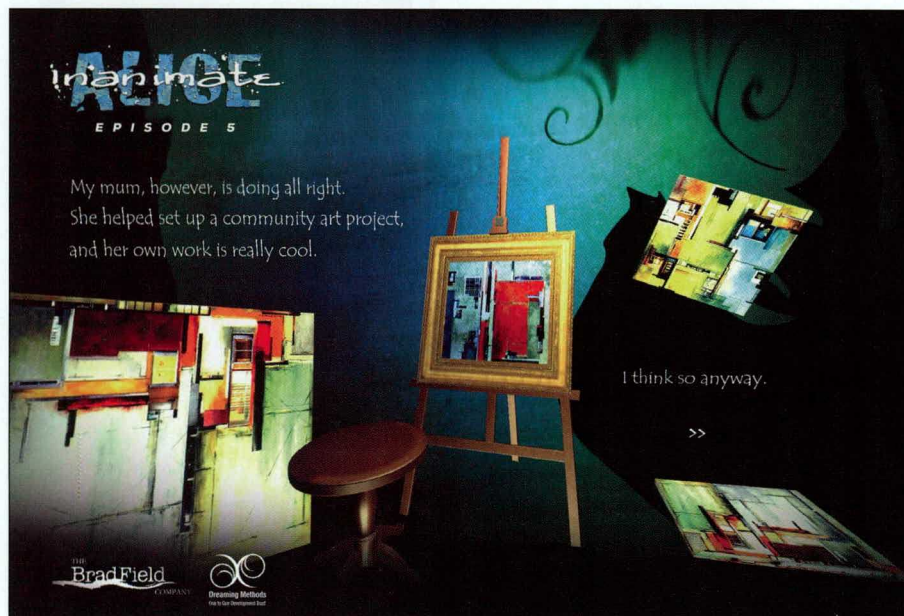
named Inanimate Alice a 2012 Best Website for Teaching and Learning. A Teacher Education Pack of lesson plans aligned to the Common Core has been developed for use in U.S. schools, available through the project's website.

I am a library media specialist and just wanted to let you know that I am using your site in a presentation I am doing . . . about the teaching I have done with Inanimate Alice and the multitude of ways it engages students and stimulates learning. Thank you for creating such a wonderfully innovative form of storytelling and for the education support materials that are so helpful!—Tara Hixon, Cashion Public Schools, Oklahoma

The transmedia affordances of Inanimate Alice create numerous ways to experience the story, making it an ideal educational tool. Various media elements engage readers and allow educators to promote and support multiple literacies. The structure of Inanimate Alice, along with an engaging story line, inspires students to extend the story into their own digital creations. The themes running throughout the story serve as vehicles for fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills across the curriculum. While ELA teachers and teacher librarians have been the most frequent adopters of Inanimate Alice, the potential is there to use the project as a tool for making literacy-STEM connections.

A LITERACY TOOL

Inanimate Alice is an example of how transmedia storytelling can serve as a powerful tool for literacy development. The key characteristic that makes the story engaging is multimodality. In order for students to comprehend the story, they must go beyond reading words on screen—they must also make meaning out of images, sounds, and actions. Such tasks call for more than traditional text-based literacy. Participating in the Inanimate Alice experience involves digital, media, visual, information, and critical literacies. The practice of negotiating these literacies concurrently is called transmedia navigation, which is
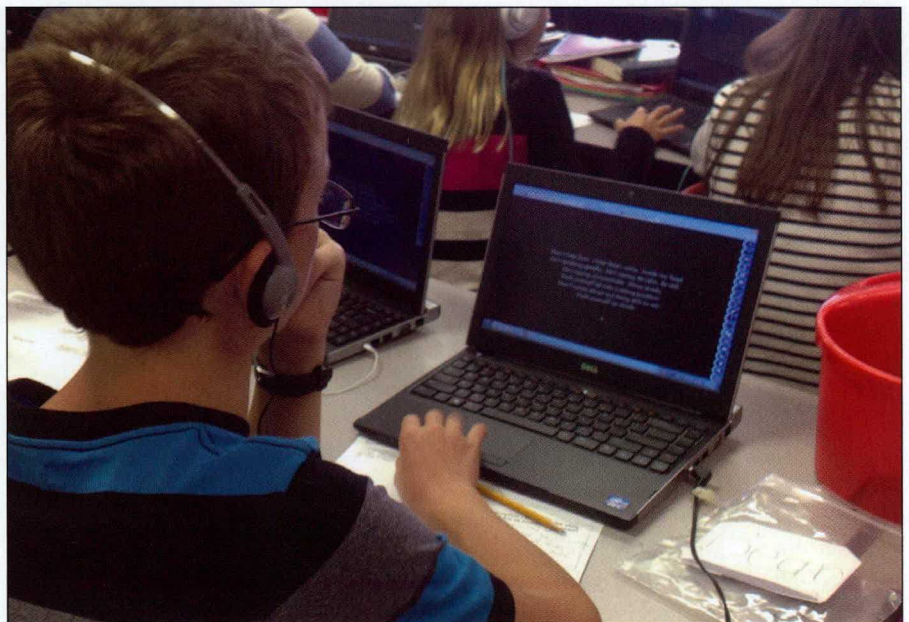
a foundational skill for inquiry-based research.

Multimodality also opens up opportunities to engage reluctant readers, who fall into two categories: the aliterate and the low literate. Aliterate students can read but show little interest in doing so. Low-literate students struggle with reading comprehension and include the ESL population. Enter Inanimate Alice.

Inanimate Alice is a wonderful combination of audio and visual text features which lures in reluctant readers and leaves them wanting more. Thanks to Inanimate Alice, I was able to bridge the gap and take students from averse

to reading with enthusiasm in a short period of time!—Donna Terra, Morse Pond School, Falmouth, Massachusetts

The transmedia elements of the story engage the aliterate by capturing their attention and with something that is different, something that is dynamic. Readers drive the story by their actions on screen. They are called to do more than merely read text— they are invited to explore Alice's environment through click actions, as well as the games that Alice herself has designed and shares with the reader. The experience of reading Inanimate Alice is akin to a role-playing game. In fact, some teachers have noted that the gaming ele-
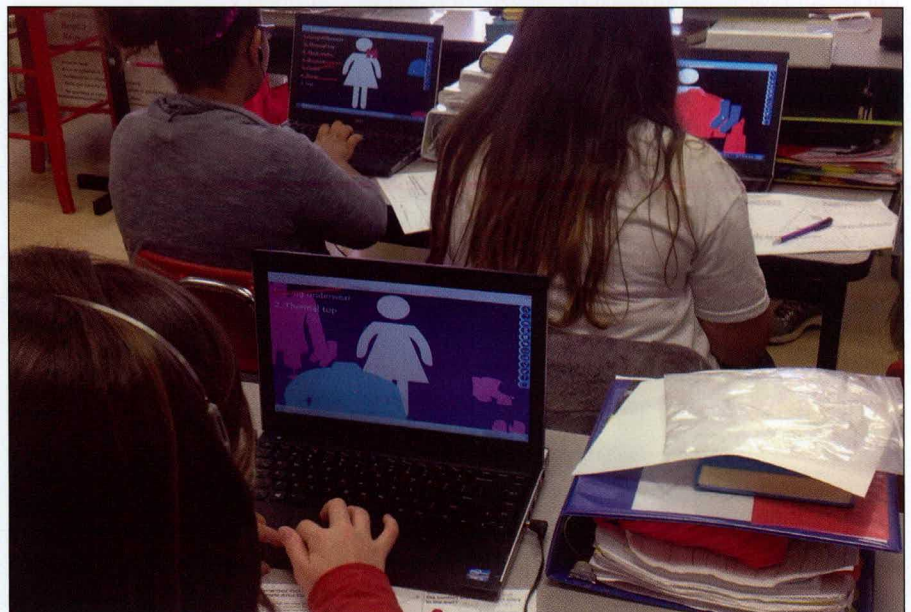
Table 1. Inanimate Alice Aligned to Learning Standards

Learning Activity	AASL Standards	ISTE Standards	CCSS Anchor Standards
Character analysis of Alice	1. Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge. 2. Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge.	3. Research and information fluency 4. Critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making 6. Technology operations and concepts	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3 Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
Structural analysis of transmedia storytelling (multimodal text should be defined to include all narrative modes)	1. Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge. 2. Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge.	3. Research and information fluency 4. Critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making 6. Technology operations and concepts	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
Digital storytelling project (including storyboarding)	1. Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge. 2. Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge. 3. Share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society. 4. Pursue personal and aesthetic growth.	1. Creativity and innovation 2. Communication and collaboration 3. Research and information fluency 4. Critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making 5. Digital citizenship 6. Technology operations and concepts	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
Cross-curricular research project based on themes in the story (e.g., a research project on the environmental impact of oil drilling)	1. Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge. 2. Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge. 3. Share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society.	2. Communication and collaboration 3. Research and information fluency 4. Critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making 5. Digital citizenship 6. Technology operations and concepts	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.8 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
Develop and design a video game	1. Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge. 2. Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge. 3. Share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society. 4. Pursue personal and aesthetic growth.	1. Creativity and innovation 2. Communication and collaboration 3. Research and information fluency 4. Critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making 5. Digital citizenship 6. Technology operations and concepts	CCSS.MATH.PRACTICE.MP2 Reason abstractly and quantitatively. CCSS.MATH.PRACTICE.MP4 Model with mathematics. CCSS.MATH.PRACTICE.MP5 Use appropriate tools strategically.
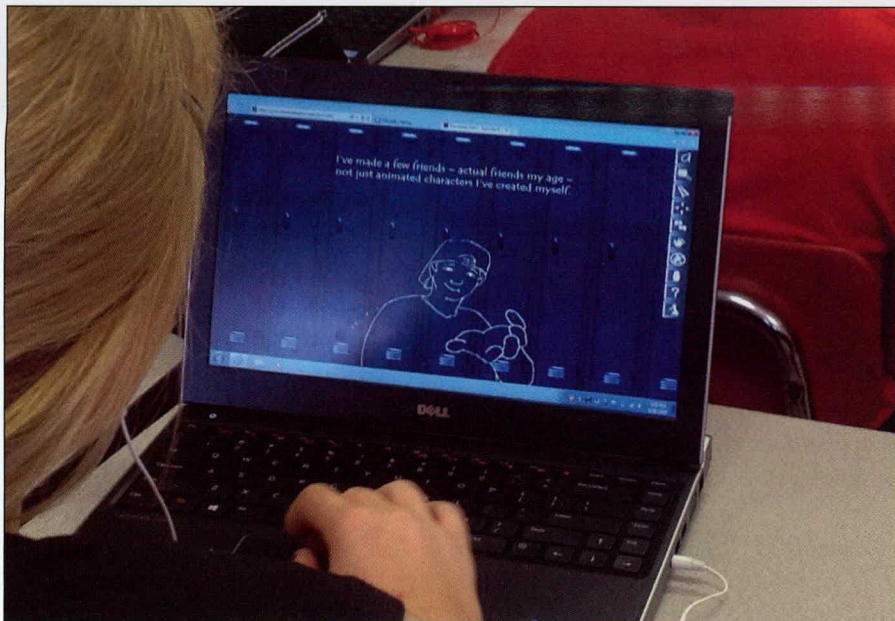
ments are what attracts their students to the story. Likewise, Inanimate Alice may serve as an entry into the world of gaming for nongamers, which is especially exciting considering the growing research on the cognitive benefits of playing video games.

For struggling readers, the simplicity of the narrative in Inanimate Alice creates a manageable starting point. The narrative remains simple for good reason. Since it is a multimodal text, each element in Inanimate Alice (e.g., sound, text, game elements, and animation) plays an equally important role in telling the story. In other words, the narrative alone does not convey the complete story. This characteristic makes Inanimate Alice accommodating to all levels of readers. It creates an environment where struggling readers can participate in the same story in which more advanced readers participate because coexisting images and sounds facilitate reading comprehension. For that reason, Inanimate Alice has been adopted by some ESL teachers.

A MAKER TOOL

Inanimate Alice also inspires maker activities such as digital storytelling and game making. By using Alice's story as the stimulus, these activities transform the making experience into a meaning-making ex-

perience. That is, in order for students to create a digital story or a game, they need to go beyond the mechanics of the tools involved to create something that delivers a message. Meaning-making means practicing literacy skills, and meaning-making with technology tools means practicing twenty-first-century literacies. Moreover, meaning-making activities that strive to create something aesthetically pleasing (e.g., digital stories or games) develop design-thinking skills, which is what the maker movement is all about.

I just started the program with my seventh graders yesterday, and they are hooked! Today they have all asked if we could work on it, not something you usually hear from seventh graders. After viewing the Alice stories and discussing what makes a good digital story, the students will be creating a digital story about our town—Lakewood, Ohio—in whichever literary genre they prefer. I am finding your teacher resource material helpful and focused.— Belinda Lowrie, Harding Middle School, Lakewood, Ohio

Digital storytelling and game-making are the kinds of maker activities that create curricular connections between literacy and STEM, or more appropriately STEAM (i.e., STEM + art). However, digital storytelling is more typically found within the

realm of language arts, and game-making within the realm of computer science and/or mathematics. The unique capability of Inanimate Alice to inspire both of those maker activities puts the project into the position to serve as a technology tool for holistic learning, uniting the language arts with math in new and innovative ways. The school library plays a special role in making those connections happen by providing the space, or makerspace, for connected learning to take place.

A THEMATIC TOOL

More than a maker tool, Inanimate Alice encourages learning across the curriculum as a thematic tool that inspires project-based learning. To illustrate this, the P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning, developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, will be used as a reference point.

At the core of the P21 Framework is academic content (e.g., language arts, math, science, social studies), with twenty-first-century interdisciplinary themes woven into the core subjects. Three of the themes—global awareness, environmental literacy, and civic literacy—also run throughout Alice's story. Global awareness is a theme reflected in Alice's travels around the world. In Episode 1, she is living in China. Episode 2 has her visiting the Italian Alps on a ski vacation. In Episode 3, Alice lives (and escapes) from Russia. Episodes 4 and 5 find her living back in her hometown somewhere in the middle of England. Environmental literacy is another theme, reflected by Alice's father's experiences in the oil industry. Civic literacy is echoed in the ethical and political issues in the story, particularly some of the seamy situations Alice's father encounters in his job. Integrating Inanimate Alice into core academic content offers an opportunity for students to explore these twenty-first-century themes, whether they are doing a country study in social studies, writing an argumentative paper on the oil industry in language arts, or learning more about the environmental impact of oil drilling in science.

A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LEARNING TOOL

Twenty-first-century skills include the 4Cs: critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. These are the learning and innovation skills that are central to the P21 Framework and necessary for deeper learning. They are also skills that are emphasized throughout the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), AASL's Standards for the 21st Century Learner, and the ISTE Standards. Inanimate Alice is an educational tool that has the power to develop the 4Cs. Close reading of Inanimate Alice develops critical-thinking skills, and the story can be used in the same way as a novel for a lesson or unit. More so, critical-thinking skills are developed when students pick apart its transmedia elements to figure out how the story is structured. Students apply creativity skills when they fall in love with Alice's character and are inspired to continue her story with their own digital creations, much in the tradition of fan fiction. Remixing Alice's story to create something new and meaningful requires critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills. Collaboration skills are developed as students work together to solve problems during the creative process.

ALIGNING ALICE TO AASL, ISTE, AND COMMON CORE

Inanimate Alice easily integrates into today's curriculum and can be implemented as an educational tool that supports the demands of twenty-first-century learning standards, including AASL's Standards for the 21st Century Learner, ISTE Standards, and the CCSS. Table 1 demonstrates how learning activities—even traditional learning activities—can be reimagined to support twenty-first-century learning and literacies and still be fully aligned to existing standards.

LOOKING AHEAD

Inanimate Alice is a work in progress. With ten episodes planned, the story has only been half-told. Episode 5 will make its debut in December and is the first to be developed in Unity, a multiplatform game-development tool. Previous episodes are flash based, resulting in implementation limitations for schools that use iPads. Moving to the Unity platform is the first step in solving that problem while at the same time introducing new possibilities for integrating 3D effects into the story. The game in Episode 5 is the most challenging yet, reflecting sixteen-year-old Alice's burgeoning skills as a game designer. Skateboarding skills are required!

Episode 6 is currently in production, thanks to a grant from the Arts Council of England. If all goes as planned, expect it to be published in the first quarter of 2015. Alice will be eighteen and in her first year of college. Big changes come with the newly found freedoms and responsibilities of early adulthood, and those changes will drive the complexity of the next story. Say goodbye to the simple games and puzzles embedded in the earlier episodes. Thanks to Unity, prepare to participate in a fully immersive video-gamelike experience with Episode 6. In true transmedia fashion, the games and the story will become one; the story will be the game.

In addition to continuing the production of the series, the Inanimate Alice team is working toward a partnership with the Mozilla Foundation. Mozilla has developed a set of free Webmaker tools to support web literacy skills, including coding, hacking, remixing, and app-making. By partnering with the Mozilla Foundation, Inanimate Alice hopes to serve as an inspiration for students to become active participants in the maker movement and to contribute to Alice's story through their own transmedia creations. Alice has already made some headway in the maker movement with her appearance at a number of Mozilla-sponsored maker parties in New York City.

Along with its Mozilla partnership, the Inanimate Alice team is in the process of customizing an open badging scheme on the Mozilla platform. The objective of this project is to create a set of digital badges that can be used by teachers and librarians to engage and motivate students' development of twenty-first-century skills.

Students will be able to earn and display badges that highlight their proficiency as digital storytellers, game makers, world travelers, and friends of Alice.

Looking ahead, Inanimate Alice is an educational tool that has the power to transform literacy and learning in the classroom and library. More than that, it is a work in progress that continues to evolve and respond to the needs of educators around the world.

WEB SITES

Alice's School Report. http://issuu.com/inanimatealice

Inanimate Alice. http://www.inanimatealice.com

Mozilla Webmaker. https://webmaker.org

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills. http://www.p21.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Fleming, L. (2013). Expanding learning opportunities with transmedia practices: Inanimate Alice as an exemplar. *Journal of Media Literacy Education, 5*(2), 370–377.

Jenkins, H. (2010, June 21). Transmedia education: The 7 principles revisited [web log post]. Retrieved from http://henryjenkins.org.

Yang, Y. H., & Huang, M. (producers), & Tasi, M.-M. (director). (2012). *Design & thinking* [documentary]. USA: Muris Media.

Amanda Hovious is a librarian and instructional designer with an interest in the role of librarians in game-based learning and transmedia education. She is a part of the Inanimate Alice team. You can follow her blog at designerlibrarian.wordpress.com.