At Beardsley Prep, what we stress are the three D’s—Dramatics, Dance, and Dating.¹

Taken as an epigraph, the tongue-in-cheek motto from the latest screen adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita captures the supposed essence of American education some seventy years ago. Nabokov’s America is long gone, and its pedagogical landscape has changed dramatically, especially with the introduction of the Internet and new media in the past two decades. In this chapter, I will address the problems of bridging the boundaries between academic classrooms and new technologies and share practical examples applicable to contemporary approaches to teaching Nabokov while using computer-generated imagery. Nabokov’s three D’s of artistic self-expression thus transform into a kind of 3D immersive practice similar to multidimensional experience that conveys depth perception to viewers by employing stereoscopy. Geolocation, virtual reality, linked data, data-driven analysis, and artificial intelligence are just some of the many opportunities for creating content, but recent scholars have been wondering whether these tools can work to produce a scholarly monograph or a new edition of classics.² We can slightly paraphrase this and ask: How can innovative technologies be utilized in studying and teaching literature in the twenty-first century? Nabokov the writer seems to offer a good opportunity for digital reading, and yet we must be careful not to be trapped by the false impression that “understanding is
simple, singular, and clickable,” as developed by some digital readers who, instead of seeing knowledge as complex, multiple, and difficult to excavate, stress entertainment over functionality.5

The editor of Approaches to Teaching Nabokov’s Lolita argues that although Nabokov “did not care for teaching (it struck him as manifest neglect of his own writing), by now even the bricks in the Cornell University sidewalks must remember that Nabokov gave his first lecture in 1951 for Literature 311–312…and that the course would go on to become a student favorite by the time Nabokov left teaching, Cornell, Ithaca, and America.”4 On the other hand, Jürgen Pieters muses in a recently edited volume that if Nabokov had been teaching half a century later, his “dream about being replaced by a tape recorder or some other technological equipment would definitely have come true,” which would subsequently encourage students “to work through the lectures individually before class, while in class the collective time of the classroom-moment would be dedicated to confronting Professor Nabokov with all sorts of queries of potential interest, both for the students and for their teacher.”5

In a world that is rapidly moving toward an all-encompassing digital culture where touch-screen monitors are as accepted as paper editions, creating an interactive learning experience for the study of Nabokov’s works pushes liberal arts programs toward experimentation with “amplified” editions.6 Future publications of Lolita, Pale Fire, and The Gift equipped with interactive interfaces and accompanied by online study materials, multimedia presentations, and images are the primary focus of my current examination of Nabokov in the age of digital humanities.

Already a decade ago, Arlene Nicholas and John Lewis observed the benefits and limitations of e-textbooks in higher education as a radical alternative to the centuries-old standard of instruction, while registering some major shifts of faculty attitudes and usages of e-textbooks at small liberal arts colleges and larger universities.7 Apple has sold more than 425 million iPads since the product’s debut in 2010,8 and the availability of e-textbooks is escalating along with the variety of electronic readers.9

In 2011, in an attempt to produce a pilot project based on Nabokov’s novel The Gift, my research team and students in several consecutive classes started working on an integrated product with sound, video, and 3D models.10 Our goal was to amalgamate an e-textbook with lecture notes on major chapters along with embedded textual and visual commentary, videos of scholarly
presentations on related subjects, and options to take interactive exams. This project, titled *Studying Literature in a Digital Environment* (SLIDE), had as its aim the creation of an iLearn app, a text-based application that would include a database pertaining to a specific literary work, featuring interactive interface and study materials. The process was manifold, and it combined (1) code development for SLIDE; (2) content research and writing; (3) design and testing of the interface; (4) launch of the iLearn application for iPhone/iPad/Android devices; and (5) management, coordination, and distribution. More than an e-book and less than a computer game, this application was supposed to be a fun and interactive way of studying Nabokov’s literary masterpiece. Furthermore, I was determined to make our scholarly app look aesthetically appealing and competitive with similar apps available in the Apple App Store or Google Play. While the app was not released in the commercially sustainable line of digital products—this was not the goal to begin with—we achieved our pedagogical goals of building knowledge and understanding how digital media are transforming cultural expression and modern education, in particular literary studies, through technological advancements.

The project was initially established in 2007 as a wiki, which allowed students to collaborate through the creation of an original scholarly compendium and showcase their work to peers as well as to interested readers worldwide. Fifteen years ago, such a public-facing aspect of a classroom project was still a novelty, and students felt excited to be able to considerably shorten

![Figure 1. Icon developed for Gift App, by Andrey Bashkin from Yuri Leving’s concept, 2009.](image)
the usually long path of making the fruits of their labor immediately available _urbi et orbi_. This collaborative input yielded a functioning computerized database devoted to _The Gift_, where commentary was organized both page by page and alphabetically (a clickable lineup led to extensive hypertext—various articles were interconnected and supplied an essential critical apparatus to Nabokov’s novel). Basic pages were headed “Timeline in the Novel,” “Motifs,” “Criticism,” and “_The Gift_ Bibliography.” Paintings, photographs, and other works of visual art were used on this site for identification and critical commentary. Images illustrative of a particular technique or school were complemented by jacket designs of various editions of _The Gift_, including archival photographic reproductions of the original journal publication in _Sovremennye zapiski_ in 1937.

While dealing with external sources, we also learned about issues of copyright and proper citation. I used this as an opportunity to introduce undergraduate students to various types of media that they can incorporate into their work, the process of obtaining permissions, and the accepted volume of quotations in an Open Access scholarly project. Nabokov studies (at least in my experience) is a fortunate exception in modern humanities because the
current literary executors of Vladimir Nabokov’s literary legacy are exceedingly cooperative with scholars, the practice championed by the late Dmitri Nabokov, whose expert and respectful handling of his father’s creative legacy was exemplary and, to a large extent, helped shaped this field into a thriving academic industry.

In 2010–2011, the original Wiki page was abandoned, and a new website envisioned as an interactive digital companion to a literary guide Keys to “The Gift” was constructed (www.keystothegift.com). The butterfly drawing by Nabokov greets the user who opens the website in a browser; as it takes a few moments to upload the Flash animation of the main page, the percentage, underneath the image that is being filled in with the colorful palette of
Nabokov’s original sketch, is quickly showing the progress until it reaches the 100 percent mark.

The design idea for the website and app was prompted by Nabokov’s novel itself. One of the key scenes in *The Gift* describes a mundane Berlin night, but disguised behind the deceptively laconic cityscape is a metatextual riddle:

Behind the brightly painted pumps a radio was singing in a gas station, while above its pavilion vertical yellow letters stood against the light blue of the sky—the name of a car firm—and on the second letter, on the “E” (a pity that it was not on the first, on the “B”—would have made an alphabetic vignette) sat a live blackbird, with a yellow—for economy’s sake—beak, singing louder than the radio.\(^{12}\)

It is not accidental that in the Russian version the blackbird crowns the second letter “A,” while the first letter turns out to be “D.” The automobile brand remains the same in both versions of the text (Daimler-Benz), but the Russian version stresses an unpronounced title of the novel, DA—*Dar*.\(^{13}\) Because one of the major motifs in the novel as well as of the artistic principles of Nabokov’s prose is that of the “missing keys,”\(^{14}\) symbolic keys were also used in the ultimate conceptual architecture of our website. It was decided to devise a non-existing place, located in Berlin, relying on a compound picture inspired by the passage from the novel cited above. Nabokov’s places in Berlin are numerous and well documented. The author’s own relocations have been reflected in Fyodor’s wanderings in Berlin on the pages of *The Gift*. Between 1932 and 1937 the Nabokovs occupied two rooms on the third floor at Nestorstrasse 22; therefore, the image of that building is incorporated in the web page design. The silhouettes of the writer and his little son are discernable at the corner of the building bearing the number 7 (it is, of course, significant considering that Fyodor moves at the opening of the book into a house with this number in its address); the couple is standing beneath the street clock *always* showing ten minutes to four p.m. (yet another allusion to the first sentence of *The Gift*: “towards four in the afternoon on April the first...”). Other clues concealed in this complex image are left for the reader (and a viewer) to decode, although some of the game principles are specifically concentrated in a bar called “Clues.” It contains various images in the form of clickable buttons hidden within the main page itself, each of those leading to a distinct category, which in a way pays respect to Nabokov’s
own teaching philosophy that favored attention to minute detail in prose composed by others (“What color was the bottle containing the arsenic with which Emma poisoned herself?”).

The advantages of running the website through an app is that a touch screen tablet responds to human gestures, thus enabling the next level of...
functionality, essential for the project designed as an innovative combination of game mechanics and scholarly apparatus. University campuses are now outfitted with standard Wi-Fi connections, allowing students to operate gadgets both in and outside of a classroom. Updated versions of The Gift app will include, for instance, a satellite navigation system to let users connect locations and their descriptions in a literary hypertext and to highlight them in an e-book available at one’s fingertips. Research data pertaining to each chapter can be delivered via interactive interface, eventually prompting students to walk down the streets of St. Petersburg or Berlin while visiting specific places mentioned in Nabokov’s novel using the Global Positioning System (GPS). Because transition from wiki to website and later to app was a lengthy process, often defined by the evolution (albeit extremely fast) of technology, students who were involved in the project at its early stages have not witnessed the transformative effect of the interactive interface, while for later generations of students it was equally impossible to appreciate the leap of the entire construct, and yet the quality pedagogy component was undoubtedly similar for all.

After developing an app dedicated to Nabokov’s last Russian novel, I realized that *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* would be the obvious conceptual continuation of the project for digitizing Nabokov studies involving students. I invited
my Nabokov class to participate in this ongoing research in lieu of their final projects. To this end, several creative teams have been formed, on Lolita and Pale Fire, respectively; here, I will focus on the former novel.

Each team was comprised of several students collaborating closely with peers sharing ideas about the future app using a virtual discussion board. Our strategy in building a new app included its overall concept (interface, imagery, graphics, and structural hierarchy), research, and accumulation of the bibliographic material to be processed and subsequently used in a database. (It is worth mentioning that no special skills in software engineering were required to complete these tasks.)

Similarly to the conceptualization process of The Gift app, we began with discussions of what the main screen should look like. Students noted that in Lolita, as readers, they deal with documents of varying stability: the (pseudo) confession, John Ray Jr.’s introduction, Lolita’s class list, the diary excerpts, letters, etc. Visually and conceptually the idea of documents can be presented in elements such as postcards, roadmaps, and hotel brochures. These documents can relate to the road trip or form “Humbert’s bookshelf” with excerpts from works by Shakespeare, Poe, Mérimée, Chateaubriand, Flaubert, and other authors providing additional information about intertextuality in Lolita. Similar structures will lead to ways of interaction with the app where documents could be organized in physical spaces such as a car’s dashboard or a motel room space. Another possibility is to combine different elements through a specific motif, for instance that of evidence of a crime: records can be presented as exhibit items, both mirroring and questioning the way that Humbert puts his reader in the position of juror. The fingerprints in the FBI’s “Wanted” order featuring a fictitious pedophile’s portrait could be used to enter subcategories in the app’s database. In this case, the question of unstable documents and concocted evidence could be a means to outlining important questions of authorship by the unstable narrator.

“Reading” Nabokov’s novel in this unorthodox manner afforded students more conceptual freedom; considering various component parts allowed them to see how design and interface can interact with content and meaning. Furthermore, breaking down the narrative in an unconventional manner, different from that of traditional literary criticism, provides discussions with a sense of creativity and the allure of imagination in a truly Nabokovian understanding of a reader who, equipped with the magic lantern, would eagerly experiment with slides even if running the risk of turning them upside down.
Another idea for a home screen of the future app suggested by students is a 1940s writing desk. Because of the desk’s relevance to both Nabokov and his character (a literary scholar), it could provide an easy visual organization and interesting background that can be continuously crowded with added objects. The desk image could incorporate drawers and a book hutch, exposing an assortment of “Easter egg”-type elements; when selected, a drawer would open a summary about Nabokov’s life or offer dynamic explorations of thematic layers in *Lolita* and survey the tantalizing history of the novel’s publication.

Some students argued that for the sake of consistency the main screen in the Lolita app should be designed in the style of a compound postcard analogous to the Berlin cityscape in The Gift app. The difference in this project naturally would be its components—instead of a “Europe of the 1930s”...
Figure 8. Concept of Main Menu page in Lolita App, 2013.

Figure 9. Page-by-page commentary in Lolita App, 2013.
theme, this new one should be based on the depiction of a generic midwestern street—featuring stylized shops, small cafés, motel entrances graced with vintage Coca-Cola signs, and typically long American automobiles rolling by. This somewhat mythologized contemporary lifestyle had been probed earlier by Norman Rockwell, who painstakingly collected and utilized props and costumes for his artwork that instantly became synonymous with the zeitgeist of postwar America. What Rockwell didn’t have on hand, “he bought, borrowed, or rented—from a simple dime-store hairbrush or coffee cup to a roomful of chairs and tables from a New York City Automat.” Nabokov’s writings are also deeply rooted in a historical context, requiring charts, maps, and accompanying illustrations that are particularly useful for understanding the material world of a given novel. Material culture in Lolita represents an important slice of its characters’ everyday lives, and Nabokov lovingly recreated in his prose contemporaneous reality from jukeboxes, radio sets, and automobiles of all brands to interiors of fast food restaurants and bars. Despite being located in the not-so-distant past, the visualization of this paraphernalia quickly sinking into oblivion requires a degree of familiarity with the visual vocabulary of America of the 1940s and 1950s. In order to catalogue Lolita’s visual background, a team of students combed through the text in search of descriptions that could be translated into actual images (i.e., references to motels, specific clothes, print magazines, food items, and popular brands). Afterwards, students tracked down Nabokov’s descriptions using search engines (mainly Google Images) for close matches pertaining to the world of Lolita. In the resulting log of our findings (we accumulated a substantial database with over three hundred images) one would find illustrations of the “tennis fashions” and the game’s historical equipment; pictures of Arizona from the 1940s; and a milk bar produced in the same period. They would also discover how the crime films were advertised, what “malts” were and what the malt maker looked like in the 1950s; what the “blanket parties” meant and what “Wellingtons” referred to in the novel.

Students thought it would be motivating to have a “signs and symbols” section of the app displayed on a sidebar of the home screen. The novel is filled with options that can be turned into clickable images: imagine, for instance, Lolita holding an apple (while moving the fruit out of her hand, or when the user touches it, a bite is taken out of its flesh); a spiral (encapsulating a frequently featured theme in Nabokov’s works); or the Russian roulette virtual simulator (Mr. McFate uses Humbert’s revolver, and unexpected
literary connections pop up in lieu of shots). Other possible dynamic illustrations are of Lolita and Humbert playing tennis (balls bounce back and forth against the four sides of the screen) or a game, “Shoot Quilty” (the goal is to “kill” the character with the limited amount of available munition while the target is constantly moving, and so forth). These humorous examples should not eclipse the didactic value and high-tech potential of digital humanities, especially as critics caution against what some call “the wholesale use of electronic texts in academic settings.”

The gamification and other digital-specific methods of engagement with a text should not be regarded as the end goal of the project but rather as an effective tool in pedagogical activity. This “playful” quality of the DIY assignments accompanied by classroom brainstorming sessions allowed students and myself (in the role of an instructor) a unique two-way communication where the former felt genuinely engaged and, what is more, typically observed and collectively gauged the progress of their output throughout the semester.

During our in-class discussions students suggested creating a family tree or a set of genograms—a kind of an ever-changing configuration reflecting the transformations that actually affect Humbert’s family throughout the novel as well as the fantasies that he frequently indulges in (i.e., that he truly is

Figure 10. Imaginary Lolita family tree for Lolita App, by Brent Braaten from a concept by Brittany Kraus, 2013.
Dolores Haze’s father or that Charlotte and Dolores are sisters). An illustrated timeline for Nabokov’s own life and, even more importantly, a timeline for the key events in Lolita, can also be depicted using graphic art.

To avoid copyright infringement, I commissioned original illustrations from those students who preferred to undertake creative assignments over dry research. Tess Hatfield’s final semester submission consisted of six images of original artwork along with study sketches. Executed in different techniques, her drawings were presented in class, as the student explained the ideas behind every image and guided us through her creative process.

The artist did some images of the series in a traditional technique, drawing others on an iPad using a stylus and then added computer graphics (for instance, the image of Humbert Humbert watching a movie with Charlotte and Lolita includes a shot from Stanley Kubrick’s screen adaptation of Lolita, extracted with Photoshop and inserted in the background behind the trio; see figure 13).

In addition to illustrations, mini-games, and extra bonuses, the Lolita app will rely on effective interactive tools: a sidebar with underline, highlight, select, and copy options granting students limited editorial functions such as saving important passages, bookmarking pages, and highlighting selected quotes. Short quizzes located at the end of some chapters enhance the learning component of the application.

In the decades since its publication in 1955, Nabokov’s Lolita has generated a tremendous body of criticism: monographs, scholarly articles, and book chapters. I’ll briefly touch upon the methodology of collecting materials from published scholarship by participants working on the digital app. Students in this class were deployed on a mission of reviewing and scanning existing Lolita scholarship. A predetermined number of sources were assigned individually, and each student was tasked with identifying relevant excerpts that could be used as footnotes in the commentary in progress. It was important to condense the authors’ original arguments to just a few sentences (with a bibliographic record provided in each case); the class project manager then conflated multiple notes into a master file while verifying the pagination following the 1992 Vintage edition of Lolita. The result of this
This is a new computer font named ‘VladimirNabokov’. This is a specially devised font based on an analysis of the writer’s handwriting from the facsimile edition of The Original of Laura. The procedure was laborious and time consuming. It involved scanning the relevant index cards at a very high resolution; the letters were digitally cut out and inserted into an exclusive digital workspace, where they could be zoomed to groups of ten or fifteen pixels in order to edit and manipulate the individual letter for the overall aesthetic.

Figure 17. “VladimirNabokov” font, based on Vladimir Nabokov’s handwriting, designed by Denis Kierans in Yuri Leving’s Nabokov class, 2013.

collective research project conducted over a few semesters is a detailed commentary (totaling approximately three hundred pages) based on dozens of publications devoted to Nabokov’s novel. This derivative but practical compilation will offer website users a functional searchable database covering years of cumulative scholarly achievement.

Finally, within the framework of the Lolita app project I invited students from my Russian cinema course to collaborate with their peers enrolled in the Nabokov course. Jointly they produced a multimedia piece (film students were responsible for technical aspects of video and sound production).30 The screen adaptations of selected excerpts from Lolita will ultimately be integrated into the app based on the novel (a group of five students31 filmed a key scene of Charlotte writing a letter to Humbert asking him to leave her house but desperately wanting him to stay: “This is a confession. I love you….”).32

While thinking about the appropriate “packaging” of the future Lolita app, students have agreed that its design should be cryptic and allusive and contain hidden clues, patterns, and details. This sounds counterintuitive for an app that is supposed to be decoding things, but when elements are interactive and give the person accessing it some agency, it can make exploring the material less labor-intensive.

I will conclude with a final touch equally belonging to cognitive processes, technical skills, and playful aesthetics rooted in the tradition of Nietzsche’s “gay science” (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft): one of my students, Denis Kierans, became fascinated with the Knopf 2009 edition of
The Original of Laura that reproduced index cards in Nabokov’s own handwriting and decided to emulate and enhance some of its features as part of his final research project. Kierans created a new computer font named “VladimirNabokov” based on an analysis of the writer’s script from the facsimile edition. The scrupulous procedure involved scanning relevant cards at a high resolution, then digitally cutting out the letters and inserting them into a digital workspace.33

The stereotyped image of traditional “bookish” humanists “cloistered in their ivory towers performing their scholarly activities such as reading, teaching, philosophizing, and publishing is now giving way to collaborative teamwork where humanists, technicians, librarians, information experts, students and artists engage with digital humanities scholarship.”34 As tangible proof and affirmation of the role of the Nabokovian reader, learners in classrooms perceive the process of interpretation as a kind of dynamic dialogue between a manipulating reader and the manipulative author.

When the co-editors of this volume asked me upon reading the first draft of this text to address the question of what lessons can be applied in other classrooms and what can the digital humanities approach to Nabokov provide our students and colleagues, I realized that the only valuable advice I could offer—putting on my Dr. Strangelove hat—is to stop worrying about the one and only correct construal of a work of art and love the “time-bomb” named Nabokov.

Notes
For discussion of the term “amplified,” coined by the publishing giant Penguin Group to refer to e-books that are enhanced to “provide deeper, richer insight into an author’s work” (Penguin Group USA), see Ryan James and Leon de Kock, “The Digital David and the Gutenberg Goliath: The Rise of the ‘Enhanced’ e-book,” *English Academy Review* 30, no. 1 (2013): 108. As the researchers point out, “on a tablet, like the Apple iPad, a digital version of a text can be supplemented with media — audio clips, timelines, maps, contextual links and so on, all of which can be accessed by the reader as he or she reads the primary text.”


It was noted at the time that “developers have barely begun to explore the features of the new platform.” Dan Tonkery, “The iPad and Its Possible Impact on Publishers and Libraries,” *Searcher* 18, no. 8 (2010): 39.

I am grateful to all participants of my undergraduate course devoted to Nabokov offered through the departments of English and Russian studies at Dalhousie University, Canada. The SLIDE project was funded by the grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.


Leving, *Keys*, 127. Nabokov considered using the affirmative “Da” (Yes) as a title for his novel.

As Julian Connolly writes, the protagonist Fyodor’s “life has been marked by a series of losses — the loss of Russia and the loss of his father, as well as numerous minor annoyances, such as the loss of keys to his apartment.” Symbolically, however, he keeps his keys to Russia through his linguistic bond and cultural legacy. Connolly, “The Major Russian Novels,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 144.


I am alluding here to the opening lines of “An Evening of Russian Poetry,” written in 1945 and first published in *The New Yorker*.


Ibid., 184.

Ibid., 170.

Ibid., 177.

Ibid., 177.

As we click on the spiral, an image of Humbert as a child is presented, then his first love holding his hand, running through a beach. In this scene a seashell, which is naturally a spiral, can be seen in the foreground. Once the spiral goes full circle, Humbert is fleeing away from authorities, this time with Lolita.


I found it hard to prescribe any exact number of images that would constitute the final project for an undergraduate course, not knowing the student-artist’s pace but acknowledging the creative process in general. We agreed that this should be a reasonable input equivalent of a final research paper (20 percent of the total grade).

Responsibilities in this collective initiative were divided as follows: (1) selection, composition, and narrating of several dialogues or scenes staged and recorded as audio and video segments; (2–3) performing the excerpts in video; (4) filming/ lighting aspects; (5) filming and composing soundtracks for the background.

Andrew Neville (camera, lights); Dillon Poberezhsky (original soundtrack, sound mixing); Kristie Smith (logistical support, selection of excerpts); featuring George Aldous as Humbert Humbert and Kaela McSharry as Charlotte Haze.


In order to edit and manipulate the individual letters for the overall aesthetic, they had to be zoomed to groups of ten or fifteen pixels; sometimes no single letter properly represented the script as a whole; in these cases three or four examples were “averaged” to create a hybrid. All edited letters were exported from Photoshop as .tiff files and then imported into CorelDrawX4, which helped to smooth out the edges, leaving only a vector, a single curve. The font is available for a free download in Volume 5 (2011) of the *Nabokov Online Journal*.
