

*WHERE IS E-LIT IN RULINET?*

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### *Rulinet, Russian Literary Internet*

Almost two decades of Russian literary Internet (Rulinet) evoke observations about the directions it is taking and the communities shaping it. Runet (Russian Internet or Russian language segment of the Internet, RU + network = Runet<sup>1</sup>), although its first very few users were singular scientists in the 1980s, started publicly as a literary phenomenon in the early 1990s (Gorny, 2007) with Dmitry Manin's *Bout Rimes* (Буриме) (1995) and Roman Leibov's *ROMAN* (1995), Zhurnal.ru, and Moshkov Library. The initial reason for this was technical - a low bandwidth internet meant it was necessary to engage audiences through textual means. A secondary reason was the emergence of Runet at a particular point in Russian history (19th September 1990 creation of domain SU (Soviet Union), this first Runet domain was registered at Eunet in July 1991<sup>2</sup>, just a year before the collapse of the USSR) and in a particular Russian cultural context of literaturecentrism. Traditionally, Russian literature embraced the realm of social critique and thus served the function of the public sphere reduced significantly under the regime's censorship. Digital freedom of speech led to the emergence of a "samizdat" conception of Runet, as an alternative to the official "print" establishment (Gorny, 2006).

The term Runet meaning Internet in Russian, according to Web Technology Surveys, second most widely used language on the Web, was included in 2001 in Russian Academy of Science dictionary of Russian language, the dictionary used by national standard language portal Gramota.ru. Rulinet, RuLiNet, Russian Literary Internet, literary and critical work in

Russian published on the Internet, was introduced by O'Sanches in May 1999 in one of the *Teneta* (Тенета) literary contest quest books (Anurkina, 2008).

Historically, the Russian Literary Internet followed the tradition of the “thick literary magazines” (such as *Novy Mir* (НОВЫЙ МИР), *Zvezda* (Звезда) or *Druzhba Narodov* (Дружба народов) and video salon culture of the 1980s and early 1990s, at the time of “perestroika” and “glasnost”. The Internet in Russia began with Glasnet (Glasnost Network), a US-based non-commercial organization providing teachers, human rights activists, scholars, ecologists and other advocates of the open society with access to the web. Since a lot of underground, unofficial and “Western” writing was censored in the USSR this was a breath of fresh, unfiltered air.

Thus the metaphor of samizdat, a practice of “nonprofessional” publishing, using carbon paper and a typewriter, was projected onto an understanding of the Internet. As grassroots and anarchic as this may seem, samizdat had its own hierarchy and literary prizes. The Internet brought about an easy and cheap means of spreading such writing. Its openness and the lack of selective mechanisms generated a lot of criticism from the professional literary community, in the late 1990s. A factor in this was that the pioneers of Internet publishing were mainly computer scientists, often mistrusted in the humanities as incapable to deal with literature.

Dmitry Kuzmin, the founder of the *Vavilon* literary portal (Kuzmin, 1997) and an apologist for “professional literature”, states that non-hierarchical independent space is “a harmful utopia” (Kuzmin, 2000). In the 1990s professional literary scholars such as Dmitry Kuzmin and Sergey Kostyrko were also infamous for their belief in a “non-differential tonus” of net and paper literature, while critics and writers such as Alexandre Genis and Alexandre Romadanov (pen name Alexroma) insisted on the existence of “neterature”(сетература) as a specific phenomenon. The literary contests on the Internet appeared four years after its introduction in Russia in 1990 (Gorny, 2007) and well before its widespread use in 2000s. The oldest and the most influential of them was *Teneta*, organized by Leonid Delitsin (then a geography major student) and Alexey Andreev (then a math major student) in 1996, both studied in the US at that time, with the aim to classify literary work published on the web.

The metaphor of the *noosphere*, the space for ideas, was also very influential in the course of the early development of Rulinet. Dan Dorfman states that an uncensored virtual reality has always been the dream of Russian literature. This utopian notion of the ideal virtual space is close to conceptions of *sobornost* (wholeness) of Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), who was dreaming of an all-encompassing unity of humankind under the aegis of one church; this was supposed to evoke emancipation from a material world subject to the destructive effects of time and space. In the same vein, the cyberpunk ideal of transformation of matter into the energy of thought and spirit resonate with the theories of Russian biologist and geologist Vladimir Vernadsky (1863-1945) who together with Jesuit and geologist Teilhard de Chardin in Paris were developing the concept of a gradual transition from the material world (biosphere) to an ideal, nonmaterial sphere (noosphere)<sup>3</sup>, at the beginning of the twentieth century (Schmidt, 2001).

Vladimir Vernadsky's and Vladimir Solovyov's theories and the orientation on the written word in the forums and guestbooks of the free discussion spaces in the early Rulinet, gave rise to a number of highly literal virtual characters, or "virtuals" (Gorny, 2007). Unlike the Western analog of virtual personas, often subject to role-play, the properties of Russian virtuals can be best compared with literary characters. The first of these was the legendary "first pensioner internet surfer May Ivanovich Mukhin" (created by Roman Leibov). Since the Virtual Character was one of the Art-Teneta nomination categories, Leonid Delytsin carefully collected all the posts of the "virtual lover Lilia Frik" (an allusion to poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's life-long femme fatale lover Lilia Brik) in order to present her for the contest in this category (Gorny, 2007). Virtuals also played the role of a writer's nickname, such as Mary Shelley (nickname for Alexey Andreev and Victor Stepnoy, prominent authors of *the Web* (Паутина), a novel describing early Runet and its inhabitants), Leonid Stomakarov (nickname for Leonid Delitsin himself).

### *What is not Russian electronic literature?*

It is not easy to find Russian electronic literature in the contemporary Runet. As mentioned above, one of the first projects marking the beginning of Runet was Moshkov

Library, where a collection of classical and contemporary literature is available for free. Commercial digital publishing portals like Litres, Bookmate and Imobilka struggle to sell literary works to a community where people are used to having digital content for free. They do not, however, contribute to the creative potential of the computer as a medium.

Under the title of Netpoets (Сетевые поэты) (2002) there exists a rather classical school of poets, who do not belong to the official printed literature community. Under the title of “electronic literature” the portal *Virtual Reading* (Виртуальное чтение) publishes traditional prose. Also, the popularity of *Stihi.ru* and a number of similar self-publishing platforms, illustrates that self-expression, or samizdat model, remains popular in Rulinet. Such work is understood as not being innovative and experimental, but rather as in opposition to the official literary establishment, duplicating the traditional framework in a new domain.

### *What is Russian electronic literature?*

In Russia the spread of personal computers coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and spread of Internet technology. Thus the notion of electronic literature is oriented towards a notion of network literature, “neterature”, and discussion of the virtual space of the Internet.

The term “electronic literature” itself wasn’t brought into play in Russian discourse to designate a digitally born work of literary art for reading on the computer screen until 2011, when it was first used by Mikhail Vizel in his review of N. Katherine Hayles’ book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008). Henrike Schmidt applies the term “digital literature”, as opposed to “digitized” (Schmidt, 2006), which treats the computer as a type of archive. “Neterature” or “cyberature”(кибература) (Riabov, 2001) are used by the Net Literature portal community (Vizel, 2011).

Leonid Tyraspolsky and Vladimir Novikov, in *Aesthetics of the Internet* (2001), and Henrike Schmidt in *Literal (Im)mobility* (Буквальная (не)движимость) (2006), stress the material quality of the digital media, allowing it to realize literary tropes. The essential

qualities for a work to be considered a piece of literature are summarized by Gennady Riabov, in *Net – or – rature?*(Сете-или-ратура?) (2001), as:

1. Creativity
2. Use of “letters”[буковки] as the key means of expression (as in Gerdiaev’s *Drama in the Forest*, 2001)
3. Use of hyperlinks
4. Dynamic nature
5. Use of multimedia
6. Multiple authors
7. Transparency of the authors<sup>4</sup>
8. Author-reader interaction.

*Cyberature* (Кибература), part of the *Net Literature* (Сетевая словесность) portal, embraces a selection of *Teneta* award-winning works and continues to publish e-lit, although less vigorously. Since the *Teneta* archive is no longer available online, *Cyberatura* provides the best selection of Russian e-lit from 1998 to 2008. The genres represented include:

- **hypertext**, *My boyfriend came back from the war* (1996) by Olia Lialina, *Landfill* (Свалка) (1999) by Julia Morozova, *Shatters* (Осколки) (2000) and *Voyage X* (Путешествие X) (2000) by Vladimir Tatarintsev
- **hypermedia**, *In the Subway (and Outside)*(В метро (и снаружи) (2001) by Sergey Vlasov and Georgy Gerdiaev, *F.M.Dostoevsky IDIOT* (2001) and *Starfall* (Звездопад) (2000) by Alexroma;
- **networked art**, *Boutes Rimes* (Буриме) (1995) and *Garden of Forking Hokkus* (Сад ветвящихся хокку) (1997) by Dmitry Manin
- **flash poetry**, *Drama in the Forest* (Драма в лесу) (2001) and *The City* (Город) (2008) by Georgy Gerdiaev, *Signs* (Знаки) (2006) by Ivan Levenko, *Sonnets* (Соннеты) (2004) by Igor Loschilov and Georgy Gerdiaev
- **poetry generator**, *Cyber Pushkin* (2002) by Sergeij Teterin and *Robot Datzuk* (Робот Дацюк)(1997, scholarly essay generator) by Andrey Chernov

- **playable media**, *Sharp-set Angels* (Падкие ангелы) (2003) and *Poetry Puzzle* (Стихотворная головоломка) (2000) by Alexroma
- **PowerPoint poem**, *The Till* (Касса)(2003) by Maxim Borodin

*When did Russian electronic literature appear and what happened next?*

The *Teneta* (1994) literary contest marked the beginning of the Russian specialized e-lit community. Apart from poetry, prose and translation, it included nominations in “Hyperliterature”, “the Creative Arts”, and “Games”. *Teneta* positioned itself as a “pure Internet contest”. The best texts, originally published on the Internet, were to be nominated. The process of nomination was intended to guarantee the quality of the literary works. *Teneta* was known for its wide spectrum of interest, as exemplified by the selection of the nominators, such as Artemy Troitsky, Anton Nosik and Alexey Andreev, all belonging to different communities.

In 1997 *Teneta* merged with *Art-Peterburg* and became *Art-Teneta*, which allowed it to attract such celebrated writers as Boris Strugatsky, Alexandre Kushner, Alexandre Zhitnitsky, Victor Krivulin and Sergey Kuznetsov as judges. However, acclaimed and established writers didn't have the basic computer skills required, and the works published online had to be printed out for them. As Petrov (2002) also points out in the article *Literary Contests in Russian Internet* (Литературные конкурсы в русском интернете), *Teneta* employed so-called skating judging system: the first place gets 100 000 points, second - 10 000 points, third – 1 000 ...the sixth – 1 point, - which means that if two judges voted in agreement the work gets the first place almost in any case. The system would have worked better if there had been a larger number of judges and a smaller number of works. Meanwhile *Teneta* failed to attract funding and a very small number of judges (10) were working in their free time to evaluate over a hundred literary works. It came to an end in 2002 with the optimistic justification “due to the enormous amount of works”.

The years 2002-2004 can be characterized by the commercialization of the web; this didn't lead to the further development of the innovative *Teneta* ideas. Instead, computational experiments like language generators were used for utilitarian functions like congratulations

and insult word generators, or, as *Poet's Helper* (Помошник поэта), for finding the necessary rhymes and rhythms, or as the Yandex, leading Russian search engine, with *Pushkin Poetry Generator* (2006), to celebrate the birth date of the poet. As an exception, *Cyber Pushkin* (2002) by Sergeij Teterin, nominated for Teneta 2002, processed the poetry of various authors to produce rather unusual nonsense output.

### *Where is electronic literature now?*

Currently, the Russian portal Net Literature and German Russian Cyberspace (started in 2012) are the two main sources where Russian electronic literature (cyberature), and critical writing about it, can be found. Additionally, digital literary works can be found at the events held by the *Media Art Lab* (Moscow), *Cyland Lab*, recently opened *Chetvert Gallery* (St. -Petersburg), and *Pro Arte Foundation*.

The development of Russian Interactive Fiction (IF) was delayed by the linguistic difficulties of adapting the parsers employed in such works. Currently, the IF community seems to be the most vibrant in Russian e-lit. It was in early 1998 when the first Russian Language menu-based interactive fiction platform Universal RipSoft Quest (URQ) was developed by Timofey Basanov (a.k.a. RipOs) and Viktor Koryanov for Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) games. Since Russian is an inflective language the design of parser-based platforms appeared to be a more challenging task. However, this was successfully undertaken by Andrey Grankin who, after several failed attempts at translating Inform (the most popular interactive fiction platform created by Graham Nelson), finally designed RTADS (Grankin 2002). RInform, Russian version of Inform, was developed during the years 2003-2005 by Dmitry Gayev (2005). Eighteen IF contests have been more or less active since 2002. At the moment, three of them are the most important: *Golden Hamster* (Золотой Хомяк) (started in 2009, an analogue of XZYZZY Awards), *Mini IF Competition* (Конкурс мини-игр(СМИ(И))), and *QSP-Compo 2012: Mamonth Within* (QSP, 2012), an annual QSP (Quest Soft Player, a menu-based platform developed by Valery Argunov) competition.

Meanwhile, by 2001, the development of Russian language media art led to mediashift, due to increase in speed of the internet and availability of other soft and hardware

tools, video poetry and flash poetry gained popularity. A number of festivals in Riga, Perm, Krasnojarsk, Moscow and St. Petersburg have taken place over the last decade. The first videopoetry festival *Words in Motion* took place in Riga in 2001 (Orbita, 2013), a year before world famous *Zebra Literary Film Festival* (Berlin, 2002). Portals like Asia Nemchenok's blog Videopoezija (2012), SELF-ID (SELF-ID, 2013), and Videopoezija.ru (2013) have also been established. There have appeared a number of creative groups, like *Orbita* (Orbita, 2013), *the Laboratory of Poetic Actionism* (2013), *Machine Libertine* (2012), *Zlystra and Pupstrip* (2012), amongst others.

Occasional pieces of electronic literature can be seen in various literary and media art venues. *The Digital Performance* by Anna Tolkacheva was a part of the XVII Verlibre Festival in Nizhny Novgorod in 2011. Again the key figure of the national poet Alexandre Pushkin was an occasion and excuse for generative poetics experimentation – in the real time, while the poets were reading, “the percentage of their pushkinness” was computed on the screen. Net.art legacy established by Da-Da-Net Festival (1993-1999), as well as the influence of Alexander Shulgin’s lectures at Pro Arte Media Art Program (2000-2001), can be traced in Ivan Khimin’s asceticist (ASCII+asceticism) installation and postdigital painting *Strokes and Incisions* (Черты и резы) (2012). It involves three dot matrix printers continuously reproducing basic ASCII characters thus alluding to strokes and incisions of pre-Cyrillic Slavic writing.

Currently, two important e-lit communities can be located on the web: “neterature” and IF. Meanwhile more and more digital literary practices and techniques are employed by traditional literary communities, such as *Colour of a Poet* media performance by Anna Tolkacheva XX Verlibre Festival (St. Petersburg part), *Dragon Dictation* by Roman Osminkin, Anton Komandirov, and Sergey Ermakov, a performance at #13 *Translit Almanach* presentation. Since Teneta, the first Internet literature contest was closed, its inheritor Net Literature has not been as dynamic, while IF, on the contrary, started gaining authority since the millenium.

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<sup>1</sup> *Web Technology Surveys* argues that Russian is used in 5.9 % of all websites, which makes it the second most popular language on the Web after English. “But Russian is used not only on 89.8% of .ru sites, also on 88.7% of the former Soviet Union domain .su, a domain which is supposed to be phased out, but still gaining popularity for whatever reason. Russian is also the most used language in several countries that belonged to the Soviet Union: 79.0% in Ukraine, 86.9% in Belarus, 84.0% in Kazakhstan, 79.6% in Uzbekistan, 75.9% in Kyrgyzstan and 81.8% in Tajikistan” (Web Technology Surveys, 2013). So Runet includes also servers at such domains as .рф, .su, .ru, .am, .az, .by, .ge, .kg, .kz, .md, .ua, .укр, .uz. Meanwhile the most popular Russian social network VK (Vkontakte) is hosted at .com domain (vk.com) and Russian Wikipedia can be found at ru.wikipedia.org.

<sup>2</sup> Relcom company started introducing online IP. Relcom network is officially registered at EUnet, the largest commercial network organization in Europe. (History of Russian Internet Development. Inquiry, 2010)

<sup>3</sup> The concept of noosphere was introduced in 1922 in Paris, by French mathematician and philosopher Edouard Le Roy (often neglected in discussions on noosphere), to formulate ideas of his teacher at Sorbonne (Paris) Vladimir Vernadsky. Vernadsky used this term only later in life, in 1930s. (Bishop, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> By “transparency” Ryabov here means that the names of the authors are known.