The Death and Re-Distribution of *V*

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1. Brief History

V[1] is a multi-part poem that explores a weave of ways to cast and map text. *V: WaveSon.nets / Losing L'una* (2002), a double book published by Penguin, won the Poetry Society of America's Alice Fay Di Castagnola Award. Its two components, bound upside-down to each other, lead to a URL printed on the V of pages at their joining midpoint. Arriving from either direction, a reader can upend the book to continue print reading—or go online to read *V: Vniverse*, a Director project created with Cynthia Lawson and published in *The Iowa Review Web* concurrently with the book's appearance. A fourth, earlier, part of *V* exists, *Errand Upon Which We Came*, a Flash interpretation of one poem in *Losing L'una.* It was created with M.D. Coverley and published in *Cauldron and Net* in 2001.

V explores configuration vs. sequence, time-based vs. fixed access, and alphabetic vs. diagrammatic display in its evocation of modes of knowing from the Ice to the Information Age. The play-read process is an iterative one, both within the Shockwave file and across the print/digital divide. *V: Vniverse* was selected to appear in the *Electronic Literature Collection*/2, 2011, edited by Laura Borràs, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Kim Stefans.

The demise of Director/Shockwave after its lack of support by Apple and purchase by Adobe, the out-of-print status of the Penguin book, and the summary withdrawal of the server to which the *Cauldron and Net* issue linked raise the question of the death of *V*, differing deaths of its differing parts. *The Iowa Review Web* (TIR Web) has also largely disappeared, but some portions, including *V*, are still accessible on the Wayback Machine. *Errand* and Shockwave *Vniverse* are available via the author's website (2015).

In 2014 a new edition of *V* in print, *V : WaveTercets / Losing L'una*, was published by SpringGun Press. Together with a coordinating app for iPad, a new *Vniverse* created with Ian Hatcher, this brings V's parts to six. *Son.nets* in the Penguin edition became *Tercets* in the SpringGun edition. The "new" text of the *Tercets* is in fact the original form in which *V* was written, one long standing wave of numbered units that did not align page or unit boundaries with punctuated closure—a long scrolling that, at the time, I felt was *not* appropriate for a codex. Current familiarity both with scrolling and with small numbered units used online to track location have since changed expectations in the codex environment.

While six parts, approachable in any order, give rise to a large number of combinatory modes, the actual state of affairs with the *V* project has stayed constant—it only ever existed partially

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[1] http://vniverse.com; http://collection.eliterature.org/2/; http://www.springgunpress.com/v-stephanie-strickland; http://califia.us/Errand/title1a.htm; https://search.itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZContentLink.woa/wa/link?path=apps%2fvniverse; http://www.amazon.com/V-WaveSon-nets-Losing-Stephanie-Strickland/dp/0142002453

on any one platform; it has always posed the problem/choice for the reader of not only which platform to read it on, initially, but also how to read it on that platform. It always exists most intensely in the space between platforms, or media, as one becomes aware of completely different aspects as salient.

Long investigation of "the book," from tablet to scroll to manuscript, from artist's to print-on-demand, has elucidated many of its features. Far less explored are the potentials for poetry introduced by digital technology, such as the potential for concurrent sequences with divergent timings, a capability that goes far beyond the scope of ordinary rhythmic synchronizations. In a digital literature, written less with "places" and more with "transitions," space opens up to a world of currents and transcodings. One does not see spaces full, so much as feel them fill. They are performed, partly in connection with others, in processes of transfer that propagate.

Digital reading practice is also necessarily inflected both by mathematical constraint and lines of code. In the print text of *V* many different kinds of number occur (some of which are described in the TIR Web interview).[2] Very often these disrupt or puncture the text. They always punctuate it in some way, but not in the conventional way numbers are used to separate stanzas. One must decide whether to read across the number, to actually read it, or to treat it as a pause of varying length.

V marks as well a suspended interim-interval where astronomy and astrology split apart, the proto-science of Tarot hanging on. One exemplary figure is that of Katarina Kepler, imprisoned witch, mother of Johannes Kepler who gave us the laws of the planetary orbits. His work on the "lunar observer" had been rejected by authorities who connected it to old wives' tales of the witch's flight to the moon.[3] *V* as a poem is positioned between these two, or three, modes of thought, in itself a claim that the in-between is where we live, that a kind of continual translation or negotiation or cross-border activity is what gives lives their pith, that there is ever a need to move on and ask about the more that is submerged in any one presentation.

2. Loss of Hover: Recreating Shockwave *Vniverse* as an App For iPad[4]

The *V* project is dedicated in the Penguin and SpringGun editions to Simone Weil—

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[2] https://web.archive.org/web/20060218053351/http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/feature/strickland/index.html#.

[3] Eileen Adair Reeves, "Old Wives' Tales and the New World System: Gilbert, Galileo, and Kepler," *Configurations* 7.3 (1999): 301-354.

[4] A portion of this section of the paper is based on a talk given with Ian Hatcher at ELO 2014 in Milwaukee and subsequently published in the special issue of *Cultural Studies Review* on Literary Practices and Performances in Transmedia Environments.

For *Simone Weil*, her Life & Thought;
her need to touch;
her gut, her mouth

—and thereby dedicated to embodied knowing. Weil faulted the Greeks only in this, that they counted the work of hands as less important than the work of mind. Her essay "Factory Work," completed after she had spent a backbreaking year as a factory worker, expands specifically on how arbitrary scheduling of the body undercuts the mind's ability to evolve embodied knowing. The *V* project's various modes of idiosyncratic manual interaction, analog and digital, together explore and are a tribute to gestural routes for thought.

Essays by Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs[5] have directed our attention to e-writing's embodiment. They quote Bronowski, "the hand is the cutting edge of the mind," and lay out Marcel Jousse's view of gesture as the body's "direct resonance" with the energies of the environment. A 2014 *New York Times* article, "What's Lost as Handwriting Fades,"[6] claims that young children's brains activate more, they learn to read more quickly, and they remain better able to generate ideas and retain information when they learn their letters by drawing freehand, as compared with typing or tracing. In both lab and real-world settings, students who take notes by hand learn better than when they keyboard.

Angel and Gibbs view words as material architectures. Diagrams, notation, and images should be considered material architectures as well. The hand is the point of contact with these architectures. The hand both manipulates and gestures, and these two actions should be recognized as separate; however, they are often metaphorically mapped onto one another by the e-writer, and this mapping is often at the heart of both the significance and the affect of a piece.

Davin Heckman, in his paper "Technics and Violence in Electronic Literature,"[7] explores e-lit as a form of violence against technical systems by way of explicating Serge Bouchardon's hand-to-hand battles in his works, *The 12 Labors of the Internet User, Touch,* and *Loss of Grasp.* Heckman stresses that, for Bouchardon, grasp signifies control. The loss of it arouses an anxious desire in the protagonist of *Loss of Grasp*, as well as in the reader who is shown a man whose grasp of his place in city, cosmos, marriage, and parenthood is troubled, as are his perceptions of homophones and of sequence. The hand actions in all three of Bouchardon's Flash pieces,

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[5] Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs, "At the Time of Writing: Digital Media, Gesture, and Handwriting," *electronic book review*, August 30, 2013. http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/gesture.

Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs, "The Ethos of 'Walking': digital writing and the temporal animation of space," *Formules* 18 (2014): 155-167.

[6] Maria Konnikova, "What's Lost as Handwriting Fades," *New York Times*, June 2, 2014.

[7] Davin Heckman, "Technics and Violence in Electronic Literature," *Culture Machine* 12 (2011). http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/435/464.

including the hit, move, caress, stretch, and scrub-like motions of *Touch*, are mouse-strokes or movements of the cursor. Two other kinds of digital touch exist, the resistive pressure touch required at an ATM machine and the capacitance contact of tablets and cell phones.

One work for the multi-touch screen that maps the manipulation use of the hand to a gestural meaning is the novella *Pry* by Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro. Here a two-finger pinch-apart gesture is used to pry open an onscreen eye. As manipulation, this action yields what used to be called stretch-text, a new insertion of text in an existing writing; as plot or framing device, it accesses subconscious awareness of the protagonist. It may also, imagistically, refer to *Un Chien Andalou* by Buñuel. The cursor gestures of Bouchardon's touch pieces, the eye-stretching gesture of *Pry*, and the gestures of first-person shooter literary games are all metaphorically meaningful and so too are those of the *Vniverse*.

V is a poem of *migration*, not only in form but also in referenced content: Ice Age/Information Age, equally nomadic, explored one against the other. Ice Age nomads in their life of travel paid obvious attention to glaciers and plant life and the migratory patterns of fish and mammals. Equally they attended that distant, unreachable but readable realm, the night sky, full of what we call stars, planets, comets, but really a night filled with traveling patterns, whether brilliant pixels or nodes, or neurons perhaps.

For nomadic people, strategies of signification are inherently time-based. Their paths are loops created in interaction with the weather. Ice-Age nomads invented a Zodiac of constellations, the clock, calendar, and map by which they tracked animals and seasons together. Information Age migrants crawl, physically and virtually, a globe-spanning network run on satellites and towers. *Vniverse* is a Star-Body grid accessed on an Information Power grid. To it we bring what the Ice Age reader brought to the circling sky—either impulses, go here, go there, or survival-oriented questions: for people of the Ice Age, how to intersect with migrating animals, or how to keep from bearing children when temperatures reach minus sixty degrees. For them, the sky was an Oracle, a constructed relation to a natural world probed with calculations. For us, the digital world is precisely that.

The original Shockwave *Vniverse* aimed to create an interface of gestures with an analogy to the hunting of animals *or* stars: choose to hunt them, discern them in their disappearing, linger, learn their signs, retrace their paths, and then engage with some persistence or force; cause disappearance, go back and inquire, re-associate, make your own meanings to justify the interference or death you have caused.

V visually can suggest hands of a clock, a volumetric wedge of sky, a witch's conical hat; it suggests an opening, an interim, an interval, a space-between extreme positions. *V* exists in the space between its variations in print and online, and in this it resembles ancient oral poems that have no canonical original with respect to which other versions are derivative. They consist, instead, in the set of performances and notations that exist and can be expanded or compressed at any time should some be amplified or lost.

The *Vniverse* does not have colored pictures or soundtracks that many associate with hypermedia projects. Cynthia Lawson and I took a decision not to include these, although

originally we considered a large set of images, because our primary interest was in exploring an extensive text project online. The diagrams work together with colored text and the visual images of the letters themselves, as these move, disappear, and are replaced or overlaid. The *Vniverse* interface uses text as it is broken and assembled and "constellation" shapes to create a world of new meanings. The ten constellations are not those of either astronomy or astrology but shapes associated with the material of the poems. They are named in the SpringGun text.

Though either the book or the digital *Vniverse/s* can be read alone, the richest meanings will occur to people who are reading between them. Within the Shockwave *Vniverse* itself many opportunities for "reading between" arise: the spelling out of triplets enables the reader to engage, in an almost auditory manner, successive letters of the poem; the WaveSon.nets associated with each constellation may be read from it—and colored keywords at each star create a "compressed" mini poem; assembled poems may be toggled back and forth between WaveSon.net and five-triplet forms that share a set of words, but not the same organization or title; both WaveSon.nets or triplet sets in decay can be read as dense visual palimpsests; the WaveSon.nets assemble differently depending on which star is clicked to initiate them; WaveSon.nets or triplet sets, while they are spelling out or decaying, can be overlaid with new text as the reader moves the cursor across the sky.

The entire *Vniverse* is designed to reward an exploration and persistence such as Ice Age nomads must have shown. It is also, however, an always renewable, forgiving space where all options are open at any time. Though responsive and renewable, it is not in every respect re-playable. Fill and decay, transitions, intermediaries, fades and residues are a great part of the matter of this sky. As the reader moves on by pressing "next," the highlighted tercet will be one chosen at random by the computer, making the temporal fragility of reading palpable. One can exactly recapitulate a reading experience only when the *Vniverse*'s sibylline space is probed directly by number, by entering any star's number in the small circular dial in the upper right of the screen.

The Shockwave *Vniverse* was created all in one frame of Director's timeline. This choice took advantage of the speed of imaging Lingo to control both animation and interaction, permitting swift gestural command of language as it appeared to emerge without lag from "the sky." Time never advances—so far as the Director timeline is concerned—but it is highly active. All of the time resources go toward responsiveness and the production of language rather than visual display, space fashioned to amplify the sense of resonance that internal timings create.

The Shockwave interface presents a text-less dot-sprinkled screen (after the loading of a twirling screen of such dots which seemed from the start to be spontaneously read as stars). It requires the reader to interact *without* directions (though some are accessible via the small X at lower screen left). One must choose to "read the stars," just as Ice Age nomads facing a sky they could not mark—but could interact with—made it into something they could read. As eyes sweep the night sky, a corollary swinging, sweeping gesture of the hand/cursor reveals diagrammed constellations, numbers, and words that appear *and immediately disappear*.

Hovering, or lingering *without* clicking, an analog to Ice Age focus on a particular part of the sky, produces the spelling out text of a keyword-tagged-and-numbered Tercet. The moment the hand leaves that spot, interactive response is lost. There is a sense of releasing text by lingering on it. As a corollary to what must have been repeated and devoted Ice Age focus, actually clicking a star stabilizes its constellation—the shape remains onscreen even as the hand moves away. One may trace the constellation *without clicking* to create compressed poems consisting of keywords—one can also *hover without clicking* over any star in the sky to read its released text against the shape of the currently stabilized constellation.

To produce knowledge of multi-year differences in the sky required enormous, persistent communal attention. In the *Vniverse*, a second click on the same spot releases the text of a 15-line WaveSon.net assembled, not sequentially, but beginning with that star's Tercet and in relation to it. Metaphorically one follows, or tracks, this assembling. The need for multi-directional awareness—natural in Ice Age hunters—is recruited as well in the Information Age. Clicking a third time, and thereafter, toggles between Tercet and Son.net form. Clicking for the third time in the same place is the most obsessive/aggressive gesture required. Persistence, persistent re-seeing, requires one to imagine that each node has an unexamined depth.

Clicking a "next" triggers a second Son.net bleeding through the first. A text-decay process takes place that leaves many states of the poem co-present onscreen: time of break-up, time of emergence, and time of cross-layer existence between dissolving and emerging co-exist with the time of reading forward. At any point in this sequence of responses by the sky, the hand can hover, overlaying any diagram or assemblage or bleed-through of text with a new number, a newly colored keyword, or Tercet from any place in the sky. Finally, clicking on the darkness—made possible by the pixel precision of the hovering cursor—makes everything disappear. The play-read process is massively iterative. Iterative processes of return overwhelm individual differences in sampling, just as years of sky observation yielded recognizable astronomical cycles, or significant conjunctions. Extinction, as much as production, is to be read.

These cognitive gestures are distinct and complementary to those required by print forms of *V*. As Edward Picot wrote, "reading…in this hopping-and-dipping manner rather than in sequence seems to bring out more quickly the themes which run through the whole group—references to astronomy, to cosmological time, to mathematical sequences, to Tarot cards, to Simone Weil, and the letter V, symbolizing fertility and virginity both at the same time...the spreading-out of stars in 'a wedge of the sky' and the spreading-out of electrons in a cathode-ray tube."[8] Indeed, to arrive at so *summary* an understanding from the print book could take hours.

Phones and tablets do not support Flash/Director. For the *Vniverse* to live, or be resuscitated, newly distributed, it needed new co-creators and new coding, becoming part of the larger family of works all of which bear on its vitality.

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[8] Edward Picot, "Hyperliterature: The Apotheosis of Self-Publishing?," *Slope* 17 (2003). http://www.slope.org/archive/issue17/hyper_intro5.html.

The iPad *Vniverse* was first attempted in Titanium, which translates JavaScript code into native languages for both Apple and Android devices. Ian Hatcher was eventually forced to reject this insufficiently stable environment, even though he had hoped to avoid learning Objective-C, the proprietary language of Apple platforms. As he noted, Objective-C code is verbose, hard to learn, and Apple is an arbitrarily-dictating, black-box-engineering profit monster.

The Objective-C *Vniverse* is built with new gestures and with gesture "translations." In the necessary trade-off between what is reasonably done in time available, "hover" is lost: no lingering, sweeping, prosthetic cursor—no cursor at all to operate as a pacing device; no clicking, single or repeated. Instead, under capacitive touch, the sky is brought down under our hands. On that sky, readers discover—recover—the distinct pleasure of shaping constellations, freely connecting stars as they wish in Draw Mode. These novel shapes do not immediately fade but persist until actively cleared. Exploring space this way is something like building a simulation, whereas cursor sweeps of the original *Vniverse* more closely resemble a searching inspection of what cannot be directly touched.

Options for interaction on the iPad *Vniverse* are signaled by five Mode buttons along the length of the screen: Draw, Constellations, WaveTercets, Oracle, and Clear. A complete linear play-through of the 232 Tercets is available in WaveTercets Mode, something the Shockwave *Vniverse* did not provide. Steve Tomasula says: "I was reading it, then carried the iPad into a dark room, so dark I couldn't see the iPad, only *Vniverse*, and the constellations stood out in a way that was so evocative…I lay on a bed with the iPad above me, like lying in a field, looking up at a starry night as the poetry played across the constellations…. Such a great reading experience."[9] Here touching the iPad is self-inhibited; Steve is *not* looking down on it, but up! Certainly this reading (a kind of *reading-to-you*) is both more oral and more active than print. The ongoing play-through of the Tercets can be shifted or re-begun at any point by touching any star at which one wishes to initiate the sequence.

A pausing or paused attention is hard to achieve on the multi-touch screen. To touch it is to commit to an act. The pause is most closely approached in Constellations Mode. In this Mode, the text of any Tercet stays still as you read it, and one can explore the keyword outline of the Constellation to learn that this order is *not* identical to the sequential order of Tercets.

The iPad *Vniverse*, unlike its predecessor, features an Oracle which the reader may consult, choosing from seven supplied questions. The Oracle's responses are unpredictable and enigmatic—it is a black box, a closed system within the closed system of the compiled app which in turn resides within the black box of the iPad, a proprietary consumer device. The Oracle, like the iPad, can be asked for information or operated as a tool, but its borders of acceptable usage are strictly controlled and its secrets as a system remain hidden. The inclusion of the Oracle, however, is an example of using gesture and interaction metaphorically to engage, contest, or comment on literature's—and society's—organization.

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[9] Steve Tomasula, private e-mail communication, 2014.

To move from one platform to another, from a Flash to an iPad environment, is to affect the meaning of directionality, trajectory, and haptic space. The translation can entail the loss of a manipulation—the mouse-down movement no longer exists, the moment of touch is a mouse-release moment—which then entails a loss of gesture: the non-clicking pause/linger/hover. As well there is a loss of location—a point is no longer a fixed place—and a loss of overview, or revelation, as sweeping gestures become swipes and no longer reveal, but re-scale, though Ian Hatcher and I ultimately inhibited zooming in order to insure legibility of the text. Though almost every effect possible in the Shockwave environment is reproducible in Objective-C, implementation decisions are made using different categories: instead of manipulating mouse-gesture, one plays with time delays and scale.

Emotional coloring shifts when an expansive swinging hand-arm movement is substituted by fingers' contractive pinch-zoom. This more physiologically constrained motion—instead of gaining in precision as expected in the physical world—is in fact less precise, less pixel-specific.

How do these shifts relate to the handwriting studies with children? A theorized part of the value of freehand writing is the variability of the child's output: it is non-standardization which activates the child brain. Politically an environment exists in which millions of readers are trained in an eccentric set of gestures. As screen real estate decreases, more pressure is brought to bear on allowed movements and toward standardized visualizations. One senses that the ultimate goal is attempted direct reading of neurons via some kind of sensor jewelry worn by the user, as if the ideal were to bypass the conscious plane altogether.

To what extent do the movements permitted us for manipulation, which always map onto metaphoric gestures, feed back onto our forms of knowing, both cultural and neuronal? Never have so many people been routed through such a minimal number of highly routinized gestures—not the gestures of hunting or planting that were developed over generations, but rather those devised quickly in some few laboratories of design—and never have these gestures been so widely needed, to obtain a job, to obtain knowledge, to obtain access—even to one's own information. The very youngest are being taught aggressive intervention and one right answer; they are given no occasion to pause, linger, consider, or return for the particular response that is, at that moment, idiosyncratically right.

Quoting Davin Heckman, from a 2014 email exchange with which I deeply agree: "I struggle constantly with being able to explore the space and scale of the screen…because my finger is a very literal material part of me... while the cursor functions as a true prosthetic, capable of extending my reach into the space, but not being actually me in that space…. With touch screen, I have no control over the representation of myself…I do not manipulate the space. Instead, I participate directly in it, and am thus manipulated by the space itself."

Can one critique media from within by doing something like modding? Or by significantly varying pacing or gesture—perhaps especially introducing variability into gestures by creating a family or swarm of works? Or is the proprietary black box the deck of the Titanic—on/in which we play at our peril? Or, indeed, do "on" and "in" lose any of the oppositional quality they have in a gravitational world? Are we already at sea, having lost overboard our children's freehand

gestures and perhaps thereby part of their ability to engage, and contest, the enormous concentration of global power that knows them, and manipulates them, through computation?