

Sonic Conquest

Sonic Conquest is a soundscape project created by Jason Henriquez for the Fall 2020 Composing Digital Media (ENGCMP 0610) course at the University of Pittsburgh.



Synopsis

Pittsburgh in 2031 becomes the fourth autonomous zone to have been taken by the Black liberation movement. Black student Mandy Landas & white student Tom Marden are studying on the new soundproof floor of the Floyd (formerly Hillman) Library when “sonic disturbances” suddenly kill hundreds of thousands of Pittsburghers.

Tom & Mandy are absolutely terrified, but Tom is relieved to see that the United States government is sending recovery teams into the autonomous zone. Mandy is concerned that the U.S. government will retaliate against them because of a recent executive order declaring that all voluntary autonomous zone occupants are aiding and abetting terrorism. Tom nevertheless calls 911 and shares their location. The operator says that a recovery team is already in the building and en route to their position.

Almost instantaneously, a U.S. soldier kicks down the door. Tom is overjoyed. This soldier with bulky military headphones and some odd handheld device calls into his radio to confirm that he will leave no survivors, but Tom is confused. Both Tom and Mandy are right there and doing just fine. A shrill sound builds, getting louder and louder. Tom yells confusedly. He then soberly asks Mandy what is happening. Mandy sighs. “They’re not here to save us, Tom.” The soldier fires his fully-charged sonic weapon.

Reflection

Background

I wrote my first concept for the soundscape proposal on 9/1/2020. The original idea entailed people becoming conduits to a “musical virus.” If a person heard the shrill screaming of an infected person, they themselves would become an infected person (conduit) and start constantly screaming as well. The soundscape would focus on the protagonist holed up in a soundproof library seeing the news on a computer. I envisioned an ending in which the protagonist fled to a Deaf mountain colony so as to have herd immunity.

This was an engaging premise, but I could not conceive of any plot progression or deeper significance. I remembered the MEDUSA, a real-life sonic weapon that can incapacitate individuals and induce extreme discomfort in crowds by means of the microwave auditory effect. I researched further and saw that sonic weaponry could cause lung and liver damage, increasing rapidly with greater intensity. I thought about these story components (i.e., sonic weaponry, crowd control, lung damage, soundproof library) in light of material realities (i.e., white supremacy, state suppression of Black revolt, police homicide by asphyxia, calling the police as a form of anti-Black violence). I saw a glimpse of our near-future. The legless original concept was now the novum of a science-fiction narrative about state violence. I wrote the script and a list of potential assets on 9/2/2020.

Production

I searched far and wide to find the appropriate audio assets, and my project evolved in the process of doing so. I changed the setting from a new library in Minneapolis to a renamed & remodeled Hillman Library in Pittsburgh so that my intended audience could better relate to the narrative. I decided against an overbearing shrill sound for the massive sonic weapon that I carried over from my original concept. Instead, I collected multiple loud booming sound effects. It was particularly difficult to find the proper sound effects of phone notifications, turning on/off the television, and phone background static. Once I had all of my desired sound effects, my partner and I recorded most of the dialogue. Some of the lines in the script sounded awkward after practicing & playing back some of the recorded lines, so they were rerecorded with more natural-sounding improvisations.

I began putting the sounds together in Audacity. I recorded new dialogue to better match the more developed soundscape. The soldier, in particular, was originally

going to report to his radio that there were no survivors in the entire building, but it was changed to him carrying out an explicit order to leave no survivors for the sake of clarity. The sound of the [booming sonic weapon](#) was challenging to conceive of and implement because it had to be uniquely powerful and terrifying. After much trial and error, three carefully layered & looped booming sounds did that job well. I had to remove, replace, pitch-shift, slow, distort, and alter some sounds in order to fit the audio assets to the narrative.

I considered the feedback that the ending could continue to after the weapon is fired, but I made the tough decision to keep it abrupt. I was concerned that any other ending may be especially depressing and/or triggering, which would not be in line with my goals for this project.

Sources:

This soundscape uses these songs from freesound:

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