

CENOTAPH AND ELEGY OF CONTAGION: IMMERSIVE SONIFICATION AND VISUALIZATION OF US NATIONAL COVID-19 FATALITY DATA

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ABSTRACT

A cenotaph is a memorial of lost lives that are displaced in space or in time with common occurrence. The absence of body in a cenotaph signifies a level of grief that transcends individual narratives, with a sense of permanence that symbolizes an insurmountable weight of collective trauma. In the COVID-19 pandemic, where lives are lost to the virus' ability to directly take away human ability to breathe, a story about the fragility of our state of being in the Anthropocene can become unfolded by voicing the collective that is sacrificed by the contagion. This in-progress sonification project investigates into this theme using the pandemic's fatality statistics. The project, situated at Rensselaer's Collaborative-Research Augmented Immersive Virtual Environment Laboratory (CRAIVE-Lab), reimagines the facility's architectural typology as a cenotaph that could be experienced from within. Inspired by Gamil and Leatherby's New York Times 2021 data visualization of US COVID-19 death toll, the project utilizes the CRAIVE-Lab's 128-channel spatial audio speaker array to directly represent individual fatality reporting with public access dataset from the Center for Disease Control (CDC). By distributing the statistical data across speaker channels, the generated ambient soundscape provides immediacy to the dynamic experience of human-scale visualization with similar aesthetics.

