

# TOXI·CITY

## A climate-change narrative



### DESCRIPTION

TOXI·CITY is a recombinatory narrative film (a.k.a. database narrative). The hybrid work follows six fictional characters whose lives have been transformed by sea-level change and flooding in an urban and industrialized region on America's North Atlantic Coast. Fictional testimonies are set against nonfictional accounts of actual deaths that occurred during Hurricane Sandy and other recent storms and floods. The work is designed for cinematic exhibition, installation in immersive media environments and personal devices.

### TREATMENT

TOXI·CITY is a hybrid-narrative that film follows six fictional characters who live in a near-future landscape along the US eastern seaboard which was one of the first industrialized port districts in North America and is today home to five of its largest oil refineries. The projects asks what how conditions of life would change if repeated storm surges and tides flooded the densely populated lands with toxins from the hundreds of sea-level petrochemical industry sites and post-industrial brownfields. The fictions are interspersed with nonfictional accounts of deaths that occurred during recent storms in the area, most notably Hurricane Sandy.

A recombinatory film uses computer code to draw fragments from a database in changing configurations every time it is shown. As some stories seem to resolve, others unravel. Just as with the conditions of ocean tides and tidal shores, the stories cycle and change without clear beginning or end. Rather, individuals grasp for meaning from fleeting conditions of a world in flux. As the characters paths intersect, story threads come together. These offer moments of resolution, contact and visions of the future, before the narratives are broken apart and a fresh cycle begins. It is a hybrid film in that it combines narrative elements with documentary imagery and elegiac nonfictional anecdotes, tying imagined futures to the realities of our contemporary condition. The inclusion of these short fragments of real lives lost in contemporary storms grounds the speculative elements of the climate change narrative. The fact that there are

many of these stories of personal endings, and that viewers of the film never encounter the same combination of these fragments twice, reiterates the immense scale of loss that such disasters involve.

The narrative events are drawn from actual events and predicted conditions faced in the Delaware River Estuary (home to five of America's largest refineries, a nuclear power-plant and numerous population centers such as Wilmington, Philadelphia and Trenton) as well as events along the nearby coastal shores of New Jersey and New York.

### TECHNICAL

The project anticipates a total of about 120 minutes of narrative segments. Each character bears witness to the conditions around them. Each tells of their experiences through about 10 segments. The segments are about two minutes in length. Narrative elements are divided among beginnings, middles, and resolutions. Interspersed in the selection of these segments are nonfictional anecdotes of actual deaths from recent storms, notably Hurricane Sandy and musical interludes. These shorter segments (about 20-40 seconds) allow for temporal variation and contextualization. The work may be programed for short versions suitable for exhibition (30mins) or single showings in feature venues (70mins). In one-play mode for cinemas, no audience would see exactly the same film. For installations that loop, not only is each pass different, but they may also be weighted to feature one or another of the character's perspectives.

The segments are constructed in these formats. The original shorting format, designed for three monitor and panoramic cinema (cinemascope), outputs imagery at about a 5:1 ratio. It is highly adaptable for screening in immersive virtual reality environments (CAVES), video walls and multi-monitor installations. Pilots have been installed for these formats. The original material also adapts readily for 4k cinematic screening and 3D media. In these formats the work is transported on hard-drive or a mini-computer. The combinatory structure is coded in javascript to play though any HTML5 browser. It could also be recoded in other formats for greater efficiency.



*Brownfields panorama in TOXI-CITY.*

### **SETTING**

*A post-industrial shoreline in a near future time (circa 2020).* Increased frequency of storms and rising tides have flooded recently active refineries, petro-chemical plants, and brownfields causing widespread contamination of nearby farms and residential communities, as well as natural preserves. A recent disaster at a coastal nuclear power plant has also contributed to the contamination of the land and water. Large areas of the lowlands of New Jersey (The Wash) have been evacuated. There are spikes in cancer rates and diseases caused by eating contaminated foods. But life goes on. The changes has been incremental and those recounting their stories focus on choice-making as they adapt to the increasing challenging conditions.

### **CHARACTERS**

There are six primary characters. A FISHERMAN looks for new ways to make a living from the toxic waters.

A YOUNG WOMAN choses to escape from the increasingly bleak remnants of civilization after losing her job and her parents. A FEMA RELIEF WORKER must cope with challenges that exceed agency capacity. A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN strives to build community. A PIG FARMER has profits from an atavistic new economy emerging from the disaster. A TEENAGE BOY copes with his own illness and his mother's desire to return to lost world of life before the climate changed.

### **NONFICTION DEATH STORIES: IMAGES**

Imagery for the nonfiction segments includes layered nonfiction photography of estuary shorelines with portraits of individuals and pixel-by-pixel altered animated elements. These transitional moments offer visual metaphors that are suggestive of the real environments in which people died, but are psychologically elegiac, and at times surreal. The imagery combines the natural, urban and industrial components, water flow and maps; these tie the actual anecdotes to themes that unfold in the imagined, but for now fictional, future.

### **NARRATIVE SEGMENTS: IMAGES**

Many of the images for this film were recorded in the Delaware Estuary which extends from Cape May, NJ, and Cape Henlopen, DE, to swamps just south of Trenton NJ. They were recorded by the filmmaker through a year long series of explorations on kayak of natural, industrial and post-industrial landscapes. Images were also collected in other industrialized estuaries and shorelines where sea-level rise may cause contamination as well as flooding. Working in tandem with the writer in a recursive collaborative process, the filmmaker gathered imagery to provoke narrative directions and in turn gathered imagery to expand themes introduced in the text. The images are organized to function with more than one text segment to offer greater potential recombinatory variation.



*Still from TOXI-CITY: Ship departs.*

### **Credits**

Directed and Produced by Roderick Coover  
Written and Produced by Scott Rettberg