2.3 Fun With Sound Design

Stage 3 is going to be tough if you don't plan this out now. The key to sound design is not to create a wall of hundreds of sounds. All of your sounds for an audiobook/drama should either be

a) A necessary part of the atmosphere/environment of a scene, or

b) Part of a necessary action by a character that moves the story forward.

Don't bother convoluting your project with sounds that don't specifically fulfil either of these purposes. You'd be surprised at how few sounds you'll actually hear in television programmes. Make your workload manageable.

Here's an example of planning sound design...

The script someone's sent in has a scene in which two characters are conversing on top of a skyscraper on a stormy night. They are sharing documents about an investigation when suddenly gunshots are fired from a helicopter. The helicopter flies off. One character is dying whilst the other stands over them. They share some emotional last words. End scene.

Let's break this down into atmospherics and actions…

First off, sounds that make the atmosphere. We're on top of a skyscraper, so you could have marginal sounds of traffic from the street below. You could also have winds and the sounds of clothing flapping.

To do this, look up Creative Commons 0 weather sounds in Freesound.org. Of course, helicopters don't fly in heavy storms so you don't want to have any weather that sounds like thunder or rain. For the clothes, look up something that sounds similar. How about a flag blowing in the wind? Sorted.

Next, action sounds. Let's keep it as simple as possible. Don't bother with footsteps. Have a bag unzipping or a briefcase being opened, followed by a piece of paper rustling. That helicopter? Find a helicopter sound and fade it in as it approaches and out again as it leaves. Mix in some sounds of gunfire, and maybe a few ricochet sounds. Have something heavy falling to sound like the character collapsing from being shot. Done.

What happens if you can't find the exact action sound you're looking for? Build your own by combining a few!

For example, in the final episode of Crowe there's a high-tech weapon that is fired indoors as a warning. We mixed a few sounds together. Firstly, a reload sound from a shotgun. Then some sounds of electricity buzzing. Then some other machine noises. Some charging up noises made by our Foley designer Adam. For the shot, a shotgun sound mixed into the sound of a large explosion. But of course, that shot's going to hit something. We mixed in some sounds of crockery and bricks being smashed. Then a smoke alarm going off.

Or how about someone diving underwater then surfacing again and reaching land? This was a fun one with a few tricks. We got a sound of a loud splash for the dive. Then we found some sounds of underwater bubbles. Then another splash for surfacing (potentially reversed in Audition). Then some water pouring and eventually dripping off the person on dry land.

But there's a huge problem here – the atmospherics already present in the scene get in the way and don't make it sound like the person is underwater! So we run this section of the atmospherics under a specific process in Adobe Audition (more on that later in "Stage 3") called FFT Filter, and the preset called The Club Downstairs. Done.

For some reason zombies are popular so let's have a go at combining some sounds to make it sound like the dead are rising from the grave. First off, light earthquake sounds. Sounds of gravel being shifted and moving. Breaking dirt. Then……record your actors making zombie noises for about 1- 2mins. There's a setting in Adobe Audition Multitrack View that will allow you to "Loop" sound effects for as long as you want.

Let's take this to the next level: *Reverb.* You'll notice that the sounds you are sourcing may have slightly different echoes on them. We don't want this. To correct this, you'll find an entire set of options in Adobe Audition's Edit View dedicated to altering the reverb of a sound. You can give all your sounds in a particular scene the same reverb. Fortunately, there's a load of Reverb presets (Room Ambience 1, Great Hall, etc) already loaded into Audition for you to try out.