

It's Foley Time



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As the sun sets in some anonymous Western town, we watch a poker game unfold in the local saloon. As the camera moves in on the poker table, we see a couple of bar patrons enjoying themselves as they slap each other on the back and shuffle across the wooden floor. Just as they clear the shot, our hero is wrongly accused of cheating and a fight breaks out. Chairs and punches fly as our hero gets in a few good hits before two thugs grab and hold him for the villain. The bad guy throws several punches to the midsection before our hero kicks him to the floor and immobilizes the two thugs. But wait. Don't they use stunt men in Hollywood? They don't really hit each other, do they? So where does the sound come from? A sound engineer created many of the sounds in this scene after the shoot in a Foley studio. Believe it or not, you can use the very same techniques to enhance your own productions.

Thank You, Mr. Foley

In Hollywood, Foley can be a verb, a noun and a proper noun. Named after audio pioneer Jack Foley, the process generally describes the creation or replacement of sounds made by humans. The most common application is the replacement of footsteps on various surfaces, but Foley can also include breathing, sniffing, the brushing of clothing and any other sound a person makes in the walk of life. Car crashes, explosions, laser blasts and ambient sounds belong to the sound effects designers.

The big-time Foley artists have several specialized tools at their disposal. First and foremost is the Foley pit. Do a Google Images search for Foley Pit, and you'll see a variety of surfaces. Wooden floors, brick, concrete, gravel, dirt and sand are the most common. The Foley artist chooses an appropriate pair of shoes and, watching the scene from the movie, attempts to match the footsteps on screen. A recording engineer captures the performance for later editing.

Of course, humans do more than just walk, and the Foley artist must recreate these sounds too. In our fight scene, the punches may actually be recordings of any number of things, none of which are actual hits. The internet is full of descriptions of various object substitutions. For instance, you can try striking a piece of raw meat, a leather chair or a boxer's punching bag. Need some breaking bones or skull cracks? Try snapping celery or smashing a squash against the floor. Foley artists have an affinity for vegetables of all kinds. They may also need to replicate other sounds, such as glasses clinking, beer mugs sliding down the bar and other noises made by the people in the scene.



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Capturing the Action

Unfortunately, you don't have a Foley pit, let alone a dedicated studio to record the sounds. What's a video producer to do? The hallmark of Foley artists is improvisation, and that's your challenge, too. In a perfect world, we could just record the sounds during the shoot, but that's not exactly practical. However, armed with a good microphone and some headphones, you can capture the actual sounds from the scene after the shoot or during a break. Did your actors walk down a gravel path? Have them go through the scene again, while you point a shotgun microphone at their feet. It won't match perfectly, but don't worry about that for now. If possible, try to capture individual left and right footfalls from each actor. We'll use these later. The same goes for any props the actors handled in the scene. Place the microphone fairly close to the object, but far enough back to capture the entire sound. Think magnifying glass rather than microscope.

For those items you can't record on the set, you can improvise a recording room back home or at the office. You must keep ambient noise to a minimum; some sound-absorbing material on the walls will minimize acoustic reflections. If you have a place for recording voiceovers, this is perfect. Otherwise, temporarily hang some acoustic foam or blankets to control the acoustics. Using your best microphone, record several takes of each effect. Try the mic up close and far away; record from above, below and alternating sides. You may not notice much difference at first, but I'm certain you'll

find one take that leaves the others in the dust.

Mixing the Magic

Once you've gathered all the Foley sounds, you may be disappointed in their lack of punch, so to speak. Big-budget films enhance the Foley and sound effects for maximum impact, and you can too. First, start with some EQ - sometimes, all that's missing is a little extra sparkle on top or some oomph on the bottom. For impact sounds like punches and kicks, make a copy of the original sound, and use the pitch-shifting function in your audio editor to lower the pitch an octave. Mix the pitched version with the original for a substantial thud. Audio compressors are also useful for increasing the impact of sounds. Start with the presets and tweak the adjustments until you like what you hear.

Remember those footsteps we recorded earlier? As you're editing, find and isolate two or three versions of left and right footfalls. Make tight, clean edits of each, and save them as individual files. On your timeline, scrub to the walking scene, and set temporary markers where each foot hits the ground. Import your Foley footsteps and, on separate audio tracks, align the variations of left and right feet to match the markers. With some careful timeline nudging and a few volume adjustments, you'll have your subject walking in no time.

Finally, you can buy Foley effects, if you just don't have the time or energy to create them from scratch. Digital Juice, Sound Ideas and many other companies offer Foley in their sound effects production libraries. These are professionally-recorded effects that cover a broad range of situations. Just fly them in from the library disc for a quick and efficient production.

Call It a Day

The sharp producer knows when enough is enough. Unless you're trying to get Jerry Bruckheimer's job, a dose of moderation is in order. Foley, by its nature, is completely contrived. Your job is to create and blend these effects in an organic way, so your viewers won't even notice. Foley can be quite a challenge, but, as with all video production skills, practice makes perfect. Start small and push yourself a little further each time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go record the squeaky door to the garage before my wife finds the WD-40.

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Sidebar

A good Foley artist knows how to fake sounds: a celery crunch makes a good broken bone, a punching bag makes a good body hit and glasses, well, they make a good glass noise, of course. Some times the Foley sound is a literal translation.

Side Bar: Foley on the Fly

Last winter, we had two big ice storms back to back. The packed ice and snow made a nice crunchy sound when I walked on it. One day, the idea struck that I should make a recording of my footfalls for later Foley use. I grabbed my camera, plugged in a microphone and started recording samples. Back

in the edit suite, the sound had a spooky quality, and I couldn't wait to use it. I'm still waiting, but I seized the opportunity to capture a one-of-a-kind real-world sound that will make its way into a project someday.

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