

Gallery mTools

Sound effects libraries usually represent a fairly major investment for any audio post facility, but buying the effects is pointless unless you've a plan for organising them. ANDY DAY says it's all in the management.

N THE COURSE of your work, a client may ask for a different car sound effect from your usual choice. You know you have another 200 spread across 15 different CDs but your assistant's got the day off and you can't face the 'yellow pages' syndrome of the listings. So you rig up the CD player, get to track 99, index 4, and so it goes on. mTools from Gallery software, running on the Apple Mac platform promises to take care of all this by combining database functions with CD digitising software, plus auditioning and spotting into Pro Tools using a few keystrokes.

The package actually consists of several separate applications, for digitising and cataloguing your library, as well as some clever modules for delivery into Pro Tools and converting files to MPEG (layer 1,2 or 3). The steps are: Authoring, which digitises the CDs and

compiles a database; Searching, which gives you fast and powerful search capabilities; and Auditioning, which lets you hear the search results. Finally there's Delivery, which allows direct spotting into Pro Tools.

I digitised five CDs from the Digi Effects library using an external Plextor SCSI CD drive, which for a 40x drive takes about 12 minutes per CD. This is improved in the OSX

version of mTools, which will be shipping by the time you read this article. Various options are possible when ripping including file type SDII or AIFF, split files for stereo, and auto detects for mono tracks. The ripped files are all at 44.1kHz and converted only at the delivery stage.

When you make a bulk import like this, you are prompted for a CD link file, this is the clever bit of mTools. Gallery has compiled lists of every major commercial CD effects library available, as well as several major music libraries. This makes digitising a breeze. Once the CD link file is located, mTools prompts the user to insert the disc, then each ripped file is automatically given the correct name as per the library list (including a description), which can be used later for the search functions.

When all the discs are loaded the SFX database

builder application is used to create a file maker database, which is the basis of the mTools databasing facilities. You then open the mTools application, import the file and the authoring process is complete.

It took about an hour and a half to author about 3000 effects, which may seem like a long time but the effort is well worth it, as you will see later. The mTools application is a template for Filemaker Pro and a front end for some of the other applications included in the package. This is good for most users, who just want to use the system without learning about databases or file convertors.

There is just one main screen for mTools, with tabs at the top to access the main functions. The detailed layout tab shows a list of the current database, with file name, effect description, file type, creation date, sample rate, bit depth, and drive location. A speaker

icon allows auditioning of the effect and a Pro Tools button copies the effect to your Pro Tools session at the correct sample rate and bit depth.

To shortlist effects you can tag files and audition them, then send the best to Pro Tools or a pull list within mTools. The summary layout tab is useful if you have a large number of effects tagged or a







large search result, as each file description is just one line long. Waveforms can also be toggled on or off as a guide to the envelope of each effect. The Pull list tab shows the current list of effects ready to deliver to Pro Tools complete with any sub selections. When auditioning an effect, shift-clicking the waveform will allow a portion of the effect to be selected for the pull list, very useful for effects comprising of several individual sounds.

The Pull list can then be sent to a specified drive location for import into Pro Tools. If you're using a mixture of MPEG, AIFF or wave files, then background applications will convert to the correct format for Pro Tools, making the whole process fairly seamless. The Search Tab allows searching on keywords and/or various sorting functions. This is where the digitising time starts to reap rewards, saving hours in searching discs and directories. The

search time is amazingly fast, it took about 10s to search my 3000 effects. I then auditioned the 22 results and selected a suitable effect, all within 2 minutes – barely enough time to even locate one track on a conventional CD player. A further mouse click later and the effect was imported directly into Pro Tools, which was running in the background. The time savings speak for themselves.

Gallery has some variations on the basic mTools system. mTools client is a search, audition and delivery-only version (i.e. no authoring), which is ideal for workstations on a centralised storage system. mTools server is a fully

installed and pre-authored system including storage and server hardware. Terminal offers a preconfigured mTools server with digital I-O for non-Mac OS users, such as Fairlight or Avid NT systems.

While mTools is not the first sound effects digitising system around, it is certainly one of the most cost effective at UK£545 plus VAT for the full version and £299 plus VAT for the Client version. The software only approach means that users can benefit from using their existing hardware to build and manage their sound library. With the ever-increasing time pressures on postproduction, the investment in time is sure to pay off.

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PROS

Software approach means you can use existing hardware, including servers; CD link files have all major library file names already entered; support for most audio file types; relatively low cost solution; massive time savings for track laying.

CONS

Up-front time investment quite high; needs plenty of drive space for authoring.

EXTRAS

If you're looking for an affordable random access video source and have a spare Mac knocking around running OS9 or OSX, then you could do worse that investigate Gallery's Virtual VTR package. It'll turn the Mac in to a nonlinear video machine that is additionally very Pro Tools friendly.

