

By Mark Latham

THE MORE TERRAIN, THE BETTER THE GAME

SETTING THE SCENE FOR OUR GAMES

When I first started wargaming, I was just a kid with limited resources, few model-making skills, and no idea of how to approach terrain-building. It was all quite daunting. And yet, I knew that, if I wanted to improve my games, my scenery collection would need improving, too. In this article, although many people like to restrict the term 'terrain' to the gaming table, hills and so forth, whilst 'scenery' is used specifically for buildings and scatter, we'll wilfully ignore that distinction. (I'm such a rebel.)

I can well remember those first forays into scenery building. Sci-fi buildings made of empty yoghurt pots with drinking straws for pipes, badly daubed with Humbrol enamels, because that's the only paint I knew existed. Or hedges made from strips of green pan-scourer stuck to cereal packet card, and hills made from ovals cut in different sizes from packing card and stacked on top of each other. It was difficult to source materials, let alone design and build stuff. But I persevered. And as my skill improved, so did my resourcefulness. No bit of plastic or packaging was ever thrown away in our house – the leftover fittings from DIY projects were added to an ever-growing 'bitz box', along with scraps of card, interestingly-shaped buttons, bits of old wire, polystyrene, cocktail sticks, and anything else that might one day 'come in handy'.

Back then, my gaming table didn't look great, I can tell you. But even as a 14-year-old²²², I actually did have a table full of terrain; nowadays, a lot of hobbyists starting out don't have that at all. I came to realize that I'm just a model-maker at heart; if I weren't into wargaming, I'd probably build model railway set-ups. The idea of playing a game on a sparsely-populated and poorly realized table is anathema to me, and this attitude causes all kinds of problems.

For example, when most people prepare to try out a new game, they worry about getting their army painted on time. I do that, too. But in addition, I worry about building and painting the terrain. And it always had to be scratch-built, back in the day, because (with the probable exception of model trees) store-bought terrain used to suck! If you could find anything at the right scale, it would be so poorly detailed and clunky that pretty much anything you could bash out of a washing-up liquid bottle would look better. Good Lord, how things have changed!

BUILDING PROSPERITY

Accompanying this article, you'll see a bunch of photos of my Western town, Prosperity. The Wild West has always been my favourite period for gaming, and when I was working on *Legends of the Old West* it became a bit of an obsession.

Sadly, due to the time constraints of working on a book to a tight deadline, I never finished my own scenery in time for the first rule book, so the photos featured in that book were mainly of scenery loaned to me by maestros Dave Andrews and Ian Mountain. They were brilliant, and they inspired me to make my own. (Incidentally, it was Dave's old modelling articles in *White Dwarf* years ago that really got me into model-making in the first place, so working with him years later was slightly surreal.)

Building a Western town was a learning experience, as I'd never made so many urban buildings before. I started off simple – a row of three shops, fully enclosed (no lift-off roofs), with very few flourishes. Basically, I made a foam-board structure and clad it in balsa wood, which I then scored to resemble planks, before sticking on all the details, such as doors, windows and shop signs. Even now, I really like the result, as the balsa gives the building a nice texture. However, the stuck-on details do look a little crude, and I knew that eventually I'd have to try inserting at least the doors and windows, or actually cutting them out of the building structure altogether, in order to have interior details.



The streets at high noon ...

The most sophisticated building I made using this fully-enclosed technique was the Undertaker's. Modelled on a building I saw whilst visiting a Wild West re-enactment show, this was the first building I made using textured plasticard in its construction, which gave me quite a nice roof effect. When I painted that building, it also taught me a valuable lesson – plastic paints up more easily than balsa. So, for the next few buildings, I switched my planking method and bought in some planked sheets of styrene (for 25-28mm figures, I find 4mm spaced planking about right). I sacrificed a bit of realism, but saved time, both in the construction and in the subsequent painting.

This column is more of an opinion piece than a modelling article, so I'll abbreviate the description of how I made the buildings. For those who are interested, here are some top tips I learned:

- A rigid base is vital for your buildings. My first few buildings had foamboard bases, which warped straight away. I recommend 4mm hardboard for sturdiness, with the square edges chamfered off with a sharp knife (careful now).
- The exception to the above is fencing. Thin card bases look better than thick wooden ones for little free-standing fences, and, miraculously, the construction of a basic fence (with crossways strips of balsa) seems to stop the base from warping.
- You can get some great tarpaulin-style roof effects using kitchen towel soaked in PVA glue. It dries pretty hard, too, and the patchwork look can actually add to the 'rough and ready' effect of a Western town.
- Roof tiles are the work of the devil. They can look great ... but life's too short. Plasticard strips to the rescue!
- If you're using foamboard for your structures, don't forget to cover all exposed foam edges before spray-undercoating, otherwise the foam will melt! I used a thick coat of PVS mixed with paint to protect the edges, although cladding them in thin card is even better.
- If you're using sand to texture the models' bases, then do so before spray-undercoating. This makes painting the bases so much easier, and the spray paint seals the sand as well as providing a good basecoat.
- While I'm all for scratch-building, I draw the line at furniture! Several online businesses sell 28mm resin furniture. Most of mine is from Frontline.
- Likewise, if time is against you, a few store-bought buildings can flesh out an aspiring town. I got a few resin buildings from Hovels, and I have the plastic Perry ranch-house still to build.
- Don't be afraid to use bright colours. I used a very muted palette for my first few buildings, before realizing that I had a very brown, bland town as a result. I watched a few Westerns and saw the bright red balustrades, yellow frontages and colourful bunting all over the towns. If you tone it down with some weathering (drybrushing or weathering powders) and some dabs of ink wash here and there, it looks great!
- I build all my sign-boards in advance. Then, when the building is finished, I measure the spaces and use a desktop publishing program to create signs on the computer. Sometimes these need over-painting or weathering, to stop them looking too fake; but generally it works a treat.



The undertakers of Prosperity.

GETTING PERSONAL

In the last few years, there has been a sheer explosion of good-looking store-bought scenery, which has revolutionized the hobby. In a way, that makes me sad, because it means that a whole generation of new wargamers probably won't ever have to use their Blue Peter skills to create their own scenery. The risk is that you'll start to see 'cookie-cutter' gaming tables, where the only personalization is the paint job on the latest laser-cut MDF buildings. In another way, however, all of that excites me, because it's really raised the bar for the average gamer. The entry-level standard for a gaming table these days is so much higher than it used to be; and that, in itself, really enriches the hobby. The buildings, hills, forests, rivers and fortifications that you can buy now are so good – and quite often affordable, too – that the days of yoghurt-pot bunkers and *papier mâché* craters are long behind us.

I've always accepted that some people just aren't great at scratch-building scenery. Though I personally insist on making the best scenery I can for my games, I've never been a scenery snob, because I believe that our hobby is for everyone, and there's a place for all ability levels and areas of interest. But now, there's no excuse for an austere gaming table. Store-bought scenery takes less effort and looks better than the things the majority of gamers can make with their own two hands, but it also removes the investment of time, love and care that traditionally goes into modelling projects.

For me, I doubt I'll ever stop doing it the old-fashioned way. But I also know that I can't help myself dabbling in the laser-cut revolution. **WS&S**

The author once saw two guys playing a wargame on a wipe-clean play-mat. The scenery was drawn on with a fibre-tip marker pen. Although this is the ultimate in simplicity, it was a sad sight to see.