

THE TABLETOP BATTLEFIELD

By Robin Dews

A LONG TIME AGO...

Long before I started to play Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000, probably even before there was a Games Workshop (*yes I remember, people played in the streets with old tyres and sticks* – Ed), I'd been a wargamer. In the evenings and at weekends I would spend many happy hours painting up armies of model soldiers, creating battlefields and fighting dozens of different kinds of engagements from small skirmish games to occasional massive multi-player battles.

I also have to admit that I am a terrain maker. Maybe it comes from owning a model railway set at at formative age, but I've always loved the process of creating and modelling miniature landscapes. The first bit of wargames terrain I made was when I was about 11 years old. It was a WWI battlescene which I built on top of the cupboard in the corner of my bedroom, complete with paper-mâché trenches, barbed wire entanglements (fuse wire wrapped round a pencil really) and a wrecked MkI tank in the middle of a water filled crater – just like the ones I'd pored over in books. To my 11 year old eye it all looked pretty spectacular and I would spend hours lining up my infantry in the trenches and simulating the bloody chatter of a maxim gun DAKKA! DAKKA! DAKKA! (*get on with it, Dews! – Ed*).

Where you actually play your games of Warhammer or Warhammer 40,000 comes down to how much space you have available – not only when you are playing the game, but also in terms of storage space between times. The luxury of a spare room that we can turn into a full-time games area is beyond the ability of most of us, and usually it comes down to the dining room table or the bedroom floor.

When we were doing the development work on Epic 40,000, we decided very early on that we wanted the battlefields themselves to look great, not just the miniatures we placed on them. That's partly why we came up with the fantastic plastic ruins you get in the game, because with a little effort (a quick spray with black paint followed by a drybrush with Shadow Grey, topped off by Skull White) anyone can use these to create some great looking terrain.

The other thing we learned early on in the development of the game was that due to the small scale of the miniatures in Epic 40,000 the tabletop really benefited from the addition of roads. Somehow they seemed to tie the different areas of the tabletop together, and not leave you looking at a ruined city in the middle of a field!

Needless to say, Andy and Jervis also enshrined this principle in the rulebook by giving all models a 5cm increase to their base rate move if they spend their entire turn travelling along the road, and a good rule it is too!

MONEY AND MOUTH!

During one of our regular development meetings for Epic 40,000 (when everyone involved in the project sits around a table and argues about who's ideas are the best!) I told everyone that they should go off and bring back some examples of the kind of terrain they'd like to play on for the next meeting. Having banged on about how much I like modular terrain, no sooner had I said this than I realised that I would now have to put my money (and my modelling knife and paintbrush) where my mouth was and go off and make some Epic 40,000 modular terrain. Little did I know when I started where this was likely to end up...

MODULAR TERRAIN

Modular terrain is the name give to a type of wargames scenery that you make in discrete bits (modules – see!) and that you join together in a number of different ways to create a larger gaming area. I like this kind of terrain. So long as you plan a bit before you actually start to make it, you'll find that it's simple to build and will provide you with an almost endless variety of gaming set ups, particularly if you have a few hills and other bits you can move around on top. What pleases me is the way in which the rivers actually run through the battlefields rather than merely sitting on top, and the way in which the hills and other landforms actually become part of the landscape.

Once I'd committed myself to some serious terrain building, I started out by planning to make just four 4'x2' game boards. However, as it often does when I start a new modelling project, things rapidly started to get out of hand.

The photographs in this article show the two different sets of modular terrain that I ended up building. The first one is the Ash Wastes. This set-up consists of eight (count 'em) 4'x2' boards that include a fully modelled up city board. They are all criss-crossed with an interlinked road system that joins together whichever way you lay down the boards. Because of the size and scale of these, they are now stored in the gaming area at the Studio. The second set (the green ones) I made for use at home, and I designed these to be packed up and stored away under a bed or in a wardrobe.

FIRST STOP...

The first stop was my local timber yard, although B&Q or Homebase or any other DIY store would do just as well. 4'x2' chipboard sheets should cost you about £1.25 a go, and so for a fiver you can get enough to create an 8'x4' table. The great thing about buying your gaming table like this is that when you've crushed your opponent and the battle is over you can tuck the battlefield under your bed and peace is once again restored.

THE ASH WASTES

From the outset, I wanted the Ash Wastes to be a bleak and desolate landscape of dunes and gulleys, cut through with rivers of chemical waste and linked together by simple tracks eroded through the surface layer.

So, after buying the chipboard I went off in search of some polystyrene. Again at Do-it-All, B&Q or Homebase, you should be able to get polystyrene insulating board for about £1.25 a sheet. The mistake I made at this point was to have bought the chipboard before I bought the foam. When I tried to put the to together I found that one was cut to Imperial (that's feet and inches!) measures and the other was metric! This meant that I had to mess

about cutting extra strips of foam and gluing them onto the chipboard where the edges didn't quite meet! This was a pain in the bum. Buy the foam first and then ask the woodyard to cut the chipboard to fit. Most suppliers have a circular saw and will cut an 8'x4' sheet down to any size you like and it will save you an awful lot of time and aggravation!

Having finally got my foam and chipboard cut the same size, the next task was to glue the sheets of foam to the boards. The best adhesive to use for this is a rubber solution such as Copydex as it doesn't shrink when it dries. It also doesn't attack and melt the polystyrene sheets like some solvent based glues will.

Finally, on the point of size, I've stated that I wanted my modules to be 2'x4' each, but there is no reason why you couldn't go for smaller (or even larger) sizes if you so desire. In practice, 2'x2' is about the smallest area you can work with, so that eight of them make up an 8'x4' table. However, I find that at this size you have to force the look of the terrain to make the roads and rivers work properly, and so I prefer the larger size. With 4'x2's you can also rotate them 'sideways' and they will still match up which gives you even more variety in your set-ups.

Back to the job in hand...

PLANNING THE ROADS

The real trick when making modular terrain is planning out how to make the rivers and roads join up, no matter which way you lie the boards. I usually take the simplest approach to this although I'm sure some of you could work out a more complex mathematical formula involving phi rations and golden means (yes yes! get on with it! – Ed)

On a 4'x2' board, the centre line of the road should be marked in the middle of each short edge (the 2' side). Once you've established this point you can turn the board sideways and mark the centre line of the road onto the edge of the next board and so on. You should therefore end up with each board having six points marked on it. One at each end in the middle of each board and two down each side 12" from the corner (see the diagram). Before you proceed further you should just check your boards to make sure that all the roads will line up.

I marked the roads on my boards by pressing a "wallpaper edge roller" into the polystyrene and impressing the road. This little tool is used by decorators to smooth the edges of wallpaper when you hang it. It consists of about a 1" wide roller on a wooden handle and is just great for marking out Epic 40,000 roads in polystyrene sheets.

When marking out your roads, don't feel that every road has to go somewhere! Some of the tracks, particularly those along the edge of the boards, can simply be marked onto the board for a few inches before they peter out. You'll find that once you start to butt the boards together these simply look like roads that come to a dead end or you can always place a ruined building or other model (perhaps a mine) at the end of them to give them some reason for being part of the landscape. In this way you will get a credible, 'realistic' landscape where the roads and other terrain features make sense rather than just being a random collection of differing scenic elements.

On the ash wastes, all of the hills and ridges were cut out of additional polystyrene sheets and glued onto the base sheet before the roads were marked out. This was done to enable me to create



the feel of dirt tracks winding through mounds of slag and mining waste.

The river boards were a little more tricky, but used the same basic principles. Having worked out my road system on the basic boards, I decided that I wanted the rivers to meet at a point halfway between the road and the corner of the board. This placed the river centre line at a point 6" in from the corner of the short edge. Once I'd worked this out I marked out the meander of the river across the board onto the polystyrene with a felt pen and then cut out the river with a hot-wire cutter. You could use a breadknife or modelling knife for this, but I would advise doing it outside as sawing polystyrene does get a bit messy!

Once I'd cut the sheet in half along the river banks, I glued them down to the chipboard, leaving a gap in between where I could paint in the toxic gloop of the chemical river.

ADDING TEXTURE.

Once all of the boards were dry I set to work modelling them up. You do this for two reasons. The first is that they look better and the second is that it makes them more resilient to damage. Polystyrene is a very soft material and easily gets broken unless given a tough surface.

To texture my boards I simply applied a mixture of PVA glue and water and then scattered ordinary builders' sand onto the sticky surface. The PVA should be thinned down to a consistency similar to that of milk, and once the sand has been scattered over the surface, leave it to stand for five minutes or so before tipping away the excess grit. The best way to do this is to work on a big sheet of paper laid on the floor (or outside) so that you can collect the excess sand, tip it back into a box and keep re-using it. (The guys who work here in the model making department use big 6'x3' cardboard packing trays that they get from the bins at the back of MFI. They are great for doing this kind of work, because the sand collects in the tray and you can easily tip it back into your box.).

One thing to note here is that on my boards I left the roads (where I'd scored the polystyrene with the wallpaper roller) clear of glue and sand. This gave them a different texture to the rough surface of the rest of the boards, and made them look as if they had been eroded from the surface of the planet by the passage of endless mining convoys or long columns of large military vehicles. Once all of the boards had been sanded I left them overnight to dry thoroughly before moving onto the next stage.

SEALING THE SURFACE

By now you should have four or more boards covered with sand and with bare patches that show where the roads are. It's a good idea at this stage to once again check that all of the roads meet at the edges before you seal and paint them.

If you don't seal your boards, you'll find that the sand begins to wear off after a while to leave bald patches, and so even if you decide not to paint them and leave them looking like a desert planet it's a good idea to go this further stage.

To seal you boards, you simply brush them once again with a mixture of PVA glue and water, but this time include a little (about a desert spoon) of washing up liquid in the mix. The reason for this is that the washing up liquid breaks the surface tension of the water/PVA mix and allows it to flow smoothly around the grains of sand. Brush this mixture all over the sandy areas of your boards and then leave them to dry again, preferably overnight.

You'll find that not only does the sand not come off when you rub it now, but the surface has acquired a tough, stone-like texture that is quite resilient to knocks. When I sealed my Ash Waste terrain, I also mixed black emulsion paint with the PVA/Washing-up Liquid blend so that once this was all dry I was ready to move onto the painting stage. Of course you could equally use green, yellow, brown, red or any other colour you wish depending on your planetary preference!

PAINTING THE BOARDS

After three days of preparation (Day 1 – assembling the boards, Day 2 – applying the sand and Day 3 – sealing the surface) I was finally ready to finish the job!

Because I'd mixed in the black paint when I sealed the boards, all I had to do was drybrush them with Citadel Shadow Grey, followed by a final work over with Skull White to get the finish you can see in the photographs.

I used a chunky 3" paintbrush to do this (I bought it from a hardware store at the same time as the polystyrene). Tip some of the paint from the pot onto a bit of scrap cardboard and work it into the bristles of the brush. When the card appears to be dry and there is no more liquid paint to be seen, begin to lightly brush the surface of you game boards with smooth, rapid, even strokes. This is much more difficult to describe than it is to do, but you'll soon get the hang of it and the drybrushing technique across the sandy texture produces a fantastic looking result.

Finally, the Skull White highlight was applied just around the edges of the hills and any other raised areas just to give them a bit of extra relief.

EXTRA BITS AND BOBS

On the finished boards, you can see two other features that I included just for fun. On some areas of the surface, I modelled on some craters before sanding and sealing the surface. This was just to provide some other areas of relief on what may have otherwise looked like a blank, featureless plain (they will hopefully also provide my troops with some cover when the shells come flying in!). Once I'd got my hands on the plastic ruined city pieces from the new Epic 40,000 game I just had to go the whole hog and model up a complete city board. This was done in exactly the same way as the other sections and I worked it out to ensure that all of the roads joined up. Before I sanded the board, I glued on the plastic ruins and then sealed them onto the surface with PVA/ water mix. I also went back and added extra piles of coral sand and larger rocks around the shattered buildings. You'll find that pet shops, particularly ones that carry a good range of aquarium supplies, are just great as a source of interesting rocks and gravel for modelling with.

Finally, after the boards were dry, I sprayed the buildings black and then drybrushed them with a few different colours (green, rust red and dark blue) to create a bit of contrast with the uniform grey of the ash. The only problem with this city board is that it can't be stored flat, but it sure does make an impressive and characterful centrepiece for my Epic battles!

That's about it for now. I hope I managed to spark you off with a few ideas. I started out by saying that once I got going on building terrain, things rapidly got out of hand. In a future article I'll be talking about how to create 64 square feet of modular playing surface for less that $\pounds 30$, but that's for another issue.

MODULAR TERRAIN A Stillmanic View

I have always liked modular terrain because if you use thick terrain boards you can dig down to model such features as streams, rivers, marshes, ravines and even coastal bays and inlets. You can't represent deep features very convincingly on an ordinary flat tabletop. Terrain features which have a vertical dimension are impressive and make the battlefield more interesting and more realistic. You can create vertical height on an ordinary flat tabletop by making hills, crags and cliffs and you can do this on modular terrain boards as well, but only modular terrain allows you to create truly realistic sunken features.

Recently I decided that my two foot square terrain boards were too small, too flat and too many. One reason that I had so many boards wasting storage space was because you need enough boards to enable roads and rivers to join up. I wanted to have less boards, but with more depth. My solution was to opt for two foot by four foot terrain boards. Each board (6mm plywood, hardboard or MDF board) would be reinforced around the edges by 2 inch by 1 inch wooden battens screwed onto the board (nails eventually come out!). You could make lighter, simpler and easier boards without doing this, but I wanted the boards to withstand a lot of use and I didn't want the edges to deteriorate.

The battens ensured that all boards had the same depth of two inches. The boards which were to have deep features could be turned upside down and filled up with polystyrene sheets or layers of thick brown cardboard box packaging. All streams, rivers and other deep features would be carefully cut into this depth allowing me to have quite steep riverbanks and sea cliffs if I wanted.

I only needed to use polystyrene or cardboard where the feature was to be cut into the depth of the board. If a feature only occupied half a board, the rest could be covered by a flat sheet of plywood, hardboard or MDF board. The terrain module would therefore have a level plain dropping down into a river valley or onto a beach. The flat area of each module would provide a level surface for placing another separate terrain feature such as a steep hill or building.

The size of the boards enabled me to sculpt large and impressive terrain features, or put more than one feature on each board. All roads and rivers went off the modules on the short edges. This was because I intended to place three boards side by side along their long edges to create a six foot by four foot table. If I did this by laying the boards on sturdy timbers resting on two strong trestles, I would not actually need a real table to rest the terrain on at all!

This arrangement created for me a table which I could dismantle when not required. I found that you can have quite a lot of variation with only five or six boards. I would suggest having one board featuring either a wide river or a meandering stream, one or two boards featuring only a level plain (which is where you place big hills or your village). One board featuring a coastal inlet or estuary (which if wide enough allows you to add the dimension of a sea raid to your battles) and one board featuring a road (which if combined with the river board, allows you to have a bridge or ford).

Because the rivers and roads entered and left the boards on

the short edges, the problem of how they would join up would never arise! When combining a road and river on the same board to create a ford or bridge, do not make the road cross the river at right angles. Instead, stick to the principle of linear features running off the short edge of the board. The river should meander so as to create a bend where the road actually crosses it. The road therefore runs along the river bank before and after the crossing point. Marshes should be put in wide stretches of the river valleys. For ravines, simply make a river valley with no river in it, just rocky slopes. To model rivers, streams and the sea use the flat base board revealed by cutting out polystyrene or cardboard, paint it greenish blue and apply a few coats of gloss varnish.

Since the terrain modules were two foot by four foot, I was also able to re-use my existing terrain boards in the new system by screwing down a pair of two foot square boards next to each other on the battens to create a two foot by four foot board. I also re-used one board for one half of a new module and used the other half to create a deep feature. In this way steep hills would descend to a level plain and then again to a river or beach. Now I have truly realistic landscape.

All terrain features except for the deep ones and the big hills are placed on the terrain modules as separate items of scenery. These include such things as buildings, woods and fields. The edges of the modules were covered with two inch wide green carpet tape to give a good finish. The finished terrain modules look professional and are very strong and easy to store, but rather heavy!

Probably the best examples of what I've been trying to do actually belong to the Perry Twins – a few sample pieces are shown below. They really inspired me, and when I saw their brilliant boards I knew I wanted some of my own! As you can see, the board on the left even features a river going from one short board edge to the other, as I've planned to do with some of my own modular terrain.