Building Scenery for Amon Sûl

Creating scenery for a game in this scale was a challenge (well - it was for me, at any rate!). The game was to use commercially produced 'action' figures of around 90mm scale and buying ready made scenery in this scale was always going to be difficult. Pete Merritt – organising the game for the Warlords - had bought a number of excellent trees and a hex cloth but the conundrum was: what to do about the rest?

Pete had various ideas for scenarios but - in the end - it was decided to concentrate on just the one for Salute Zero Seven: Amon Sûl. So building that was to be my task. Fortunately I had some unexpected free time at the turn of the year to complete what was going to be a tall order!

What to build?

Tolkein describes the remains of the tower at Weathertop as *"a wide ring of ancient stone work now crumbling or covered with age long grass"* The Peter Jackson film has very elaborate, cinematic ruins (not surprisingly) but I wanted to make something a little more restrained. However, I didn't just want to make a ruined tower on its own and – rereading the book – I noted that, during the Hobbits' approach to the Weather Hills with Strider, they saw the remains of green-grown walls and other old stone works along the line of hills and escarpments and I think that - in Tolkein's mind at least - he was thinking of Hadrian's Wall. And, even if he wasn't thinking that, I sure was!

So in the end my plan was this: I wanted to build the base of an old tower with some nearby curtain walls of some sort and they would be reminiscent of Hadrian's Wall in terms of colour and feel, though not so much in design.

Bases

So the starting position for the scenery element of this project was some hexagonal bases and me digging out photographs from one of my enjoyable trips to that magnificent northern England fortification. The first item that needed to be made were the bases for the individual terrain pieces, cut to follow the hex system printed on the cloths that the game would be using.

Club member Ivan Congreve - skilled with wood in a way I'll never be - cut shapes to fit the hexagons. The base for central tower area is around four feet across, but I wanted to make the sections of broken walling somewhat smaller and so five of those were created, the longest being around two feet and all around two hexes (say ten inches) wide. The smaller bases were cut from 6mm MDF, the larger central 'tower base' section from 10mm and all had timber cross bracing added to stop them warping.

Building up the terrain

Before I go any further, please let me state, for the record, that I am noted for my phenomenal impatience, it has to be said. In the past I have made scenery of this type in 'mod-roc' plaster bandage and had considered this as a route for Amon Sûl, but dismissed it as being both costly, messy and long winded. Gosh, if only I'd known...

In scratching my head for ideas, I then had some thoughts about heated (with a hot, paint stripping gun) sheet bextrene (similar to sheet styrene), which would then be 'draped' over rocks and allowed to melt into fabulous folds but - when I stopped deluding myself - that idea went away... Visions of setting myself alight with flaming panels of plastic and – in the process - ruining two perfectly good bits of bextrene (which I'd already purchased for around £20) with the heat

gun (another £25) came to mind. Another 'fast' solution was needed that didn't involve arson and insurance claims.

In the end I chose expanding foam aerosols of the sort used for squirting around holes in walls when you plumb in a toilet (or similar). These aren't cheap, I have to say, but are at least quite a lot of fun to use (if you like using aerosol whipped cream they are, anyway…). And as I'd already spent £45 on sheet plastic and heat guns, what was another fifty quid of expanding foam…!. One of the points to note, however, is that in use this product is very, very sticky (something unmentionable and blankets spring to mind) and I have a couple, of ruined tee-shirts to prove it.

So: onwards! I built up layers of the 'squirty' foam to make the bulk of the 'hills' themselves and then built the actual walls from one inch thick, 'hard', pink expanded sheet styrene foam. The process for building the walls used two methods: some of the larger sections of wall had 'panels' of foam scribed with a pencil into a block formation. Other sections were built 'Lego' fashion with added extra blocks cut as loose material and assembles. This foam was cut with either a knife or - more usually - a battery powered hot wire cutter.

All of this foam was treated with textures to make painting easier. The panels and blocks were sometimes stippled (usually with a stiff nylon hair brush) just to give a 'surface'. The pink foam was then sprayed with Games Workshop Rough Coat and, when dry, the whole base (and some bits of wall) was painted liberally with white PVA wood glue straight from the bottle and sprinkled heavily with sand and varying sizes of gravel and 'talus' from modeling suppliers ans (more cheaply) from builders merchants and garden centres.

Finishing

After that lot had dried out the models were ready to paint. I had some paint mixed up in the local Homebase to match in with the game cloth: I wanted the added scenery not to stick out from the cloth like a saw thumb and – as the clothes were a mid green – I used the (much vaunted and heavily advertised) colour matching system to buy some mid-green paint and some other colours. However I over estimated and bought far, far too much, as it happened. But I have trouble guess-timating things like that. The other colours I bought included some 'earthy' coloured paints in the form of 'match pots' to use for the walls and for rock colours and dry-brushing the whole affair. Thinking hard of Hadrian's Wall, I decided that I definitely didn't want to use a grey for the walls: I wanted more biscuit and brown tones, even pinky granite colours for a change: I'm just sick of grey stone on wargames tables!

After brush painting areas, I then blended the harsh emulsion paint with aerosol cans of Tamiya acrylic in dark earth brown and dark green. Finally for painting, the whole model was dry brushed in various lighter brown and ochre tones.

When all of the paint was dry I added rocks from lumps of chopped cork (Antenociti's Workshop) stuck down with PVA or hot glue (when I was in a hurry) and these too were just dry brushed in magnolia, rather than repainting the whole piece of cork (they were a pretty acceptable 'cork brown' colour, not surprisingly, and I didn't see the point of painting them brown just for the fun of it…).

After the cork had dried I then added chopped 'static grass' flock and 'chopped foam' to make different ground textures (almost all from Antenociti's Workshop) and gave extra depth to the ground work with stains from chalks and coloured inks (here's a tip: go to an art shop and buy big bottles of ink rather than little pots from your local games shop: it's much more economical).

At one stage I made a low tree and some bushes using something I'd bought from a pet shop as a fish tank ornament with some suitable colour lichen, with some excellent added leaves from Antenociti's Workshop (fixed in position with aerosol glue – 3M Display Mount) but – to be honest – I could have used a twig from the garden (and did on the remaining bits of scenery).

The tower itself

The central tower has a ring of pink foam 'stone blocks' which has been formed into a 'U' cross section and filled and glued into place using the last of the squirty aerosol foam. I wanted to get a 'slumped' look: these ruins are meant to be old after-all. I also wanted to add some steps and the odd small bit of broken statuary (in just a slight nod towards the film, but far, far less elaborately). The steps came from a couple of 'Balrogs and Gandalf on the Bridge in Moria' sets of (from the same range of action figures as the rest of the game pieces). The Balrogs are fine (or would be if they had got the correct number of legs and fewer wings) but Pete bought two sets to obtain an extra leg so that – at some juncture – we could convert them into a whole (wingless) fire demon. The up side of all of that is that the sets came with mini bridges and sets of steps and the latter were pressed into use inside the tower. I could have just built my own, but it seems a pity to waste what we already had and – as I said earlier – I'm dashed impatient.

The statues by the gates were be the two 'bookends' that came with one of the (many) sets of 'director's cut' DVDs of the movie of The Lord of the Rings. The statues themselves are rather nice, representing, as they do, 'The Argonath': in the book they are a huge pair of statues on the river Anduin and are, for a change, very nicely rendered for the film. The two resin items are similarly nicely produced but have been doing precisely zip on my shelves for several years, save stopping my DVDs falling off the back of the telly, and are well made and sculpted so – rather than just selling them on eBay – I thought I'd put them to good use.

To get the right 'aged' feel I very carefully through them down the stairs so that they broke (and head hear, a hand there) and I incorporated them into the gateway of the tower.

A 'tree' was salvaged – a small dead plant of some sort – from a friend's garden and I thought for a while about adding foliage but in the end decided on a 'dead tree' look so – dry brushed and with an added metal rod forced up it so that it can be slid in and out of the scenery (to make transportation easier) I was done! The surrounding terrain for the tower got the same cork, flock and scatter treatment as the smaller wall sections, with some added sheets of cobbled paved areas in the center, looking – in this scale – like some sort of flooring.

In conclusion

So – that's the scenery built. At some point we will have to replicate the hexes from the cloths onto the scenery in some format, hopefully subtly enough so as not to ruin the look of the scenery but yet still visible enough to be seen: always a problem on hex based games, I guess. Our best idea will be to use nodes (stickers I suspect) but – as I write this – it's still January and there'll be a lot of play testing between now and Salute!

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