

Terrain System

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A friend of mine, Mark Luther, does amazing presentations in a very unique way. The link above will take you to his flickr photos. Amazing stuff!

He uses a heavy cloth draped over styrofoam hills as a base. The cloth is spray painted various natural colors. He draws on roads, dirt, and village streets with oil pastels. Sometimes he does the same with streams and he shades hill contours with cross hatches to accentuate elevations.

The result is like a fine work of art! At first I was skeptical but this past weekend I tried it myself and really enjoyed the process. It's actually quite liberating compared to traditional approaches of latex or styrene roads.

After a game he simply washes the cloth and resprays as needed (sometimes blues from streams don't like to wash out completely.)

Another advantage is the low cost. Latex rivers and roads can be quite expensive and confining. With Mark's approach one gets exactly what one wants with respect to layout without having to but another T intersection or 4' of straight sections.

I think you'll find his photos inspiring!

Tim

The trees are generally store bought (eg Woodland scenics and others). Mark has been experimenting with "masses" of trees with foliage clumps in the middle and fully modeled trees on the perimeter. One key change he makes to store-bought trees is painting them! He hits them with spray paint to soften the colors since they're usually way too bright out-of-the-box.

As for painting the ground cloth it's a two-stage process:

1. dye an appropriately colored sheet earth tones such as brown for dry areas and green for temperate...then spray paint for even greater color variety...this stage is permanent except for occasional touch up.

2. for a specific game draw roads, streams, dirt areas, etc. using oil pastels. For example roads seem to work well if first painted a dark brown followed by a medium brown and then a tan/yellow for high lights. Even crops and plough fields can be made this way.

Two modifications that I've done are as follows: for the ground mat I use a very light canvas or very heavy linen already of the appropriate color (no need to dye). Then, just like Mark, I'll spray paint to add variety. For example I just made a tan cloth over-sprayed with various darker/lighter tans and greens while leaving areas of the base color showing. I also scotch guard before applying oil pastels.

For woods I'm using foliage clumps broken into large lumps with relatively flat bottoms. I then cut 1/2" thick cork to fit the cross section of the foliage clump's bottom being sure to leave some foliage overhanging. After spraying the cork very, very dark brown I glue the clump to the top of the cork shape. The result is a copse of trees that's very stable and perfect for 6mm figures (and cheap!). I'm next going to try adding dashes of color on the perimeter of the cork to imply tree trunks, although the trunks are mostly invisible anyway. I'll also spray paint the foliage as Mark has done.

Mark's not sure where his came from since it's so old but he thinks it's an old sheet they happened to have in their house.

I bought mine at a local fabric store. It's some kind of very heavy linen. The very subtle pattern looks like a canvas weave and it's heavier than a sheet but not as thick as true canvas. The perfect weight to have some substance but not so thick that it can't lie well over styrofoam hills (heavier fabrics tend to resist laying flat over hill shapes).

It has enough tooth/texture to take the pastels well but not so much so as to present a distinct pattern.

After some experimentation I've discovered that when looking at material you want:

- heavy enough to be opaque but not so thick it won't lay over hills
- some tooth to take pastels but no distinct, repeating pattern that will be noticeable or distracting (that's why the squarish pattern of my canvas-like linen works well...most fabrics have a distinct pattern)
- a very flat/dull surface without any sheen (the spray paint will help this out if it's a problem but canvas and most linen is perfectly flat/dull)

- a subtle, muted earth color
- must be washable

I suppose the easiest thing to do is look for super-duper lightweight canvas and simply spray or, better yet, dye it an appropriate earth color so you can get precisely what you want (grayish tan/brown). Waterproof fabric dyes are readily available at fabric stores and art stores (be careful with dyes!).

What's really interesting is that you don't need any traditional flocking as seen on most game mats (eg store bought versions). The tooth of the fabric alone is enough to convey a sense of dirt and grass, especially at 6mm scale. In fact now when I look at my 6mm GHQ troops on my old game mat it looks weird with the flock's texture since it's so "out of scale" compared to the troops.