More than just miniatures… a look at terrain in Warzone and Chronopia

By Dave "Firstborn Canuck" Poole

There are many different table top miniature battle games available to gamers these days that vary in scale, depth and content. From skirmish sized encounters to large-scale epic battles. Some with very in-depth and complicated rules systems and others being simplified games aimed at the 12 and under crowd. Realms covered include the traditional fantasy worlds, like those of Tolkien, in-depth historical reenactments, and futuristic military conflicts in space. There are many to choose from and many different ways to differentiate them.

One of the interesting ways to look at and compare these games is in how they employ and are effected by the use of model terrain. Now, as this fanzine is largely dedicated to the skirmish scale games Warzone and Chronopia, most of what I discuss here will be directed at that level. However, I will attempt to touch on other scales and game systems.

The use of terrain in most systems seems to be broken down into two different schools of thought. In many games, especially the more "simplified" ones, terrain is represented in large blocks, which form complete barriers to movement, line of sight and missile fire. While certainly somewhat unrealistic and less than aesthetically pleasing, this allows for ease of gameplay and keeps game tactics more simplified. I'm not going to argue that this is better or worse as it largely depends on what you are looking for in a game. If you want to just have a fun game this can lead to some nice quick battles and keeps things nice and neat.

In many other game systems, more complicated attempts are made to simulate the effect of movement, line of sight and fire through terrain. This can greatly affect how the players utilize the battlefield and can bring true tactics into play. This is most evident in smaller scale games and those aiming to develop more "realistic" rules sets. The side effect of such rules, however, is usually an increase in the actual number of rules that need to be learned, which can increase the learning curve and possibly slow down gameplay.

Now, specifically addressing Warzone and Chronopia, you see an attempt to develop a somewhat realistic set of rules while keeping those rules as short and sweet as possible.   Does this work? Well,

yes and no. For the average gamer this strikes a happy medium giving them a chance to use a little more brain power in their games without requiring a lot of rules. At the same time the true casual gamers may consider the terrain rules a waste of time and just one more trivial detail to take into account.

Then those who desire a more realistic game may consider the attempt a 'slap-dash' attempt at truly realistic terrain rules. I don't think you are going to find a true "perfect" way to make rules governing the use of terrain.   By the same token there are no "perfect" games either. Everybody is looking for something different.

How do Warzone and Chronopia utilize terrain? These two games specifically address terrain in three ways.

1) They restrict movement through more difficult terrain by reducing the movement of a model.
2) They restrict line of sight and thus targeting of other models.
3) They apply cover advantages to models in or around terrain.

Hence, the terrain itself affects three of the most important parts of your game - maneuver, targeting and the damage that you deal to your enemy.   The conclusion you can draw from this is that the player who utilizes the terrain present the best will be at a great advantage in the game. This reflects very well on real historical conflicts and has the effect of making true life tactics very applicable to table top gaming.

In both games [Warzone and Chronopia], missile fire can be quite dominant when played on a board with little or no terrain, or when played by people who do not utilize the terrain that is there. This is most evident in Chronopia. The use of cover and well thought out movement of your figures in an attempt to reduce the time models are exposed becomes quite crucial. I would argue, and this is not a new comment, that to get full enjoyment of either game you really need to have a good amount of terrain on your board. If not, players do not have the opportunity to use cover and concealment maneuver tactics and play balance issues tend to stand out much more.

The rule of thumb we usually use for our Chronopia games is at least one moderate piece of terrain for every square foot of table space. Usually we even end up using a few more pieces just to be sure. This can include a small stand of model trees mounted on foamcore, a purchased piece such as a resin building or a terrain feature such as a hill. When laying out the board we look for "firing lanes" where a well positioned archer could dominate a sizable lane of the board and we try to position the terrain pieces to keep such lanes to a

minimum. Maybe two such lanes at the most with each having a maximum length of 24" on a standard 4 foot by 4 foot board.

The same rules of thumb can be used in Warzone games as well, however, as missile fire tends to be more prevalent (except for the Mishima forces who definitely need to utilize cover) you can get away with a little less terrain. Nonetheless, you will most likely find the games that are the most fun are those that, by some manner, restrict line of sight so players are forced to make more decisions regarding how to maneuver and position their forces. One of the better games we have played in Warzone was one where we modified the Venus night fighting rules to fight in caves. We didn't allow flare guns and such so the only way models could get line of sight was through muzzle flashes or by getting within 9 inches of a target. This made for some very ugly close up fighting with lots of maneuvering.

Now in some other game systems, terrain becomes simply an impassable object or a limited impediment. In these games it still plays a factor in how a player maneuvers his forces, but it limits the players options making things a bit simpler and easier.   While I'm no expert on ALL of the game systems out there I think you will see this trend more in the larger scale games and those tailored to a younger audience. Given all that though, unless you are playing on a table that is 90% flat and open (and that does happen especially with WHFB and WH40K at times) then players still need to look at the table and decide how best to use the terrain there. Blocks of terrain restricting movement can be used to protect fragile units while they maneuver; they can be used to funnel an attacker's movement and can help to dictate who attacks where.

Given what I have said, one of the major issues then becomes how to depict terrain for gameplay. There really are three major approaches to this.
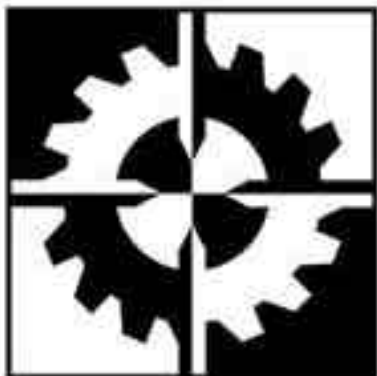
1. First and most common, gamers can build their own model terrain from building supplies, model railroading terrain kits, etc… There are books, magazine articles and many websites available to assist in this, including articles on my own website.

2. The second approach is to purchase pre-made terrain such as that from WarZone GTS (no connection to the game), GeoHex, and through many others who make gamer specific model terrain. This offers a quick way to get very durable professionally made pieces albeit at a higher cost.

3. This is what I recommend for beginners, is simply to proxy for your terrain. This means putting something on your table that represents the terrain you want to use. This could be something as simple as a cut out piece of green paper laid down to represent a block of forest, a book to represent a hill, etc. While certainly not as pretty it gets the job done and it's definitely the cheapest alternative.

Use whichever approach appeals the most to you, there is no "best" way as long as the gaming is fun.

As more and more game systems come to market, we see more approaches on how to apply terrain in TTGs. In it's own way it's fun to watch how this develops over time and it's fun to try out these different approaches. After all, that's part of what makes us gamers.

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