Making Modular Wargames Terrain

I use 600mm x 600mm x 5mm MDF boards reinforced with 40mm deep softwood battens around the edges (see diagrams 1 to 3) to build my modular wargames terrain. Many people use similar techniques with polystyrene (or other expanded foam) tiles instead.

The surface of each 600mm square terrain board ‘tile’ is covered with Polytex textured decorators finish using an old 25mm to 50mm paint brush. I use a mixture of the ‘fine’ finish Polytex and ‘coarse’ finish to achieve the textures I want. I can also mix in things like sand or sawdust too but have found that I rarely need to do that.

Polytex is hard wearing and flexible so does not crack and flake so easily as some other textured finishes. You can add PVA glue if you need particularly robust sections.

Tooth picks, old paintbrush handles, or thin plastic or plywood sheets cut into formers are good for scraping out road or ploughed field textures that you might want. A stiff old paint brush is good for ‘stippling’ the surface to get a general ‘grassy’ (or any other) texture.

Paints are matt emulsion mixed to the colours you require at a hardware store. Small cheap ‘matchpots’ are a good way of trying out various colours on your terrain first before getting the shades you like mixed at the store in larger quantities.

After painting, you need to ‘dry-brush’ the terrain with progressively lighter colours to get a textured effect. If you don’t do this then the terrain looks ‘flat’ and uninteresting. Sometimes I add grass flock here and there too – but not often.

Sisal string died green/brown and cut into short lengths gives grassy clumps and these can be glued in corners or the edges of roads or fields to give the impression of a lot more foliage than there really is. Add some small pebbles with the grass as a feature.

I have uploaded photographs of all the main modular terrain boards you see in the Border Reivers Wargames photos on Google Photos here: -

https://photos.app.goo.gl/57FVAFwhzxFVrSRx5

Every battle shown on the Border Reivers Website that uses modular terrain, uses these boards so they are very versatile. Only my coastline boards and town board are not shown in the photographs (I don’t have ready pictures of them–yet!).

My roads were originally scraped out of the wet Polytex using cocktail sticks or old paintbrush handles but a couple of years ago I decided to scoop them out of the MDF board itself and shape the ruts with an electric wood carving set – which looks a bit better but was not really worth the effort (and cost) in the end I think.
Diagram 1
Terrain board construction.
Each terrain board ‘tile’ is made from 600mm x 600mm x 5mm MDF sheet. I get my MDF sheets cut to this size at a hardware store so they are a perfect fit. The softwood frame underneath is 40mm high x 20mm wide and just a bit narrower than the 600mm width of the MDF tile. This is so the tiles fit perfectly against each other without having to worry about getting the softwood frames exactly square.
The frame is cut to size and the ends glued with PVA and screwed together.
The MDF tile is glued with PVA and pinned in place on the frame.
Then the Tile is textured with the landscaping technique that you wish to use.
All roads and rivers run to the middle of the edge of the tiles so they can match up (see photo gallery).

Diagram 2
Tile Stacking
My tiles stack together in groups of three like the diagram below. The hollow spaces thus provides room to store boxes of scenery such as trees, hedges, walls as well as loose hills, fields etc.
Each group of three stacked tiles are strapped together with a carrying handle as shown below. This makes them easy to carry around and store. They can be stored upright like suitcases.

An entire 6ft x 8ft table with all required terrain can be stored in four stacks like this. Then I have ‘speciality stacks’ such as a ‘coastline stack’ and a ‘town stack’ and a ‘canal stack’.

This system gives a very quick and easy way to set up wargame terrain yet is extremely versatile and robust. It is heavy enough to ‘sit’ in place without sliding around during the game yet light enough to carry around by two or three people and quickly pack away. Storing scenic items in the terrain boards means they do not get ‘lost’ or mixed up with something else and are always there when you set up a new wargames table. I have used these modular terrain boards for over 14 years and they have worked very well, needing only minor repairs and occasional paint touch-ups in that time.

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