

Design Forum

BOOT HILL? SURE! BUT WHAT SCALE?

Ralph Wagner

The introduction to the original BOOT HILL states, "Figures used should be about 25mm or 30mm scale." But my friends and I play in 54mm since I got an old Louis Marx & Co. western town from the '50s. If you're not lucky enough to find a town, can you still have a good game in 54mm? And what about other scales? To answer these questions and more, I would like to explore the advantages and disadvantages of playing BOOT HILL in any and all scales available.

Let's start with the smallest scale, HO, or 15-20 mm. Two companies make western figures of polyethylene in an HO scale. They are Airfix of England and Atlantic of Italy. Airfix figures have been available in the U.S. for years. They offer a fair range of figure sets, including cowboys, Indians, cavalry and wagon train. The wagon train is no longer sold in a box by itself, but is now included in a cavalry fort set. It is well worth the cost because of the women and citizens included in it. The main problem with the entire line is a lack of sharpness and detail in the faces. Also, I find the hand guns too large. Airfix has been changing its HO line to look like its 54mm counterparts, though as yet this has only been done with WWII figures. When this change-over takes place for the western figures, the 20mm gamer will have some very fine figures. On the basis of its other products, I feel that a false-front town and more western figures would be well within Airfix's ability.

Atlantic HO figures have recently become available in the U.S., and if I were Airfix I would be worried, not only because of Atlantic's large western line, but because of its fine detail. Their western line includes what Airfix has, and more: miners, buffalo hunters, bad guys, sheriffs, etc. Let's look at the variety in one set, "Outlaws and Sheriffs." It includes: bank robber being shot, woman with rifle, man being dragged by a horse, man being hung, and a two-gun sheriff. This is much better than your standard bunch of cowboys with guns!

If I have any complaint with the Atlantic figures, it would be that some are too long, while others are suffering from severe pumpkin-headedness. The Indians (Sioux and Apache) have been hurt by poor research, so one must get a good history book and a sharp blade before going very far. If you play by not letting the figures into the buildings, then the Atlantic buildings are meant for you. I would just use the printed front of the building and build a new structure around it. Although at this time Atlantic does have an overwhelming edge in quality and quantity over Airfix, I would still include Airfix figures in my town, though I would try to improve on them.

I feel that in 20mm there is a very wide range of figures available. The only things missing are Mexicans and a stage set. Atlantic buildings can be used along with HO railroad buildings, but the latter are a bit too small. The overall problem with the scale is that everything is too tiny. 20mm is fine for large battles, but perhaps too small for 1 to 1. The furniture for barroom brawls has to be built by a clever germ.

McEwan Miniatures, Minifigs and Grenadier all make Wild West gaming figures. McEwan's range is small but interesting; a fat Mexican and a Clint Eastwood figure stand out. Comparing the western line to the other McEwan figures, it seems to be lacking detail, but they do offer extra weapons. Most of the figures also appear in mounted versions.

Minifigs makes a wider and more interesting line than McEwan. The figures are more detailed and finished. They offer, among others, a saloon girl, a sleeping Mexican, a lady, a cowboy being shot, and several different gunfighters.

Grenadier's "Western Gunfighter" line has the greatest variety of figures, some 50 of them. These are all pretty good, though the poses aren't very dynamic, and Grenadier has had some problems in the past with casting quality on these guys (it seems to have been cleared up). However, for the variety they offer, they are almost essential to a complete 25-30mm town.

One could have quite a few different western figures by mixing items from these companies together. Still lacking are a good bunch of Indians, rolling stock, cattle, and cavalry. Although one can always play

around these missing types, they can add a lot to a town. As for the town itself, only cardboard is available.

Elastolin makes wild west figures in two ranges, 70mm and 40mm, both of styrene. Now, 40mm would be the ideal scale to play 1 to 1 in, it seems to me; small enough for a big town, yet large enough to be seen. Although Elastolin makes some outstanding figures in other lines, the Wild West is not its long suit. Only a few figures are really passable, and there are not nearly enough to get the ball rolling.

Valiant makes the only metal 54mm figures worth buying for gaming, because the uniqueness of the cameo figures (Doc Holliday, Wild Bill Hickock and Wyatt Earp) makes them worth the price.

Three companies make 54mm western figures in polyethylene. They are Airfix, Britains, and Louis Marx & Co. The Airfix line is the same in content as the HO, excluding the wagon train, but that's where all the similarity stops. The 54mm figures are excellent in all respects: poses, detail and authenticity. The only thing that is poor is the horse-saddle-rider arrangement.

Britains has much to add in western figures. Each line has six mounted figures and six on foot. The lines are cowboys, cavalry, Apache and Plains Indians. The cowboys have just had six new hands added, and a stagecoach and covered wagon are further nice additions to the line. The basic problem is with the weapons; the handguns are too small, while the rifles are too big. However, for such few problems as the line affords, I feel Britains shouldn't be missed.

Louis Marx & Co., has been producing figures for many years. Almost all of us have seen a "Fort Apache" set. Marx puts out "Storage Box" sets which include cowboys and Indians, combined as well as separate. The cowboys have many poses and different types: mountain men, miners, bad guys and sheriffs, etc. Included in these sets are many accessories, such as a wagon, woodpile, watering troughs, extra weapons, steers, etc. These are the kinds of things that really make a fine western town. Cavalry and "Davy Crockett" types can still be found in the large fort sets.

As far as I'm concerned, the Marx figures are excellent (the miners are special stand-outs). As good as it is, the line is not without its problems. Some of the handguns are not too clear, two of the cowboys' arms are too long, the Indians have some small figures, and the two Mohawks are totally out of place. These are minor problems. It almost seems to me that Marx is trying to keep these very fine figures a secret. Most people regard them as toys, but I will stack the majority of them against anything else.

Airfix, Britains and Marx together provide a very wide range of figures. In 54mm, the major problem is space and a town. Britains does make one, but it seems far too juvenile, and the fine Marx towns are no longer commercially available. I would suggest making some buildings yourself. A town can be made using shoeboxes and balsa wood. Set the box on its side, and use the bottom for the front of the building. Cover the front with balsa wood. Victorian architecture was big, so the 1" to 1' cut balsa used for dollhouses can often be used here. As far as furniture goes, outside of the Marx accessories, some can still be found in the toy department, but most will have to be found at flea markets or Salvation Army toy bins. Once you do find it, it will have been worth the effort.

Any of these different scales can be used with the BOOT HILL role-playing system, with a little distance conversion to adjust for size. The distances in BOOT HILL assume the use of figures in the 25-30mm range. When using 15-20mm figures, cut all distances in half; for 40mm, multiply all distances by 1 3/4, and for 54mm, multiply everything 2 1/2 times. These may not be exact, but they work. Of course, it's much easier to make all distance changes and note them before play, rather than trying to convert every distance in the middle of the game.

To come to any conclusion on which is "best," 20mm vs. 54mm, or metal vs. plastic, would be wrong. I wanted to explore as many scales as possible and plausible, so as to afford the gamer the most enjoyment possible. Remember two things: In one-to-one all that is needed are two figures, not two armies; and the true measure of any figure is what it looks like after the modeler is done, not what it looked like before.