

How to take Photos of your Minis

Saturday, 17 May 2008

Last Updated Sunday, 18 May 2008

It is extremely frustrating when after spending days labouring over a hot paintbrush or sculpting tool to produce that perfect mini or conversion you've been planning for ages, you can't quite seem to take photo's that do any justice to your work. Anyone who's looked at a photo of themselves and recoiled in mild horror will know that the camera lens is a very harsh critic, and she is no more benevolent to miniatures!

As most of us don't actually have access to the studio lighting rigs and £1,000 cameras which they use in magazines to take our photos, we have to make do, and with a little bit of work you can get really good results without any fancy gear. This tutorial follows the steps I used to take a photo of a Wood Elf Spellsinger I painted this week.

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Things you will need

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A digital camera;

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A desk lamp or two;

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A large sheet of paper;

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An old box or stack of books;

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Plus a painted mini of course!

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Background

The first thing you need is a background to take the photos against, something plain and neutral which will not interfere with the details of your models, and make focussing the camera easier. The simplest way to do this is with a sheet of white paper attached to a pile of books or and old box.

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Lighting

Lighting is the hardest part of miniature photography, as it is the harshest critic to any imperfections on the model itself. As a rule of thumb, the less complex your camera is, the more light you will need. The best light to use obviously is natural light from a window, preferably in a north facing room where there is no direct sunlight which can cast harsh shadows on the model and confuse the focus of a camera. Unfortunately this light is very rarely strong enough to take decent photos, so I would recommend using artificial lights.

Simple desk lamps are perfectly fine for lighting up your mini, and the ideal setup is to have two coming from different angles. This stops any harsh shadows forming on the mini and means that all surfaces are visible. The best type of desk lamp to use are the ones which have the long fluorescent tube in them, as these cast a soft area of light which reduces shadows on the model even more. If you are going to take photos with only one light, this type of lamp will produce the best result.

This is the setup I used to take the photo of my Spellsinger. It ain't pretty, but it is really simple and doesn't need any special rigs or backgrounds which I've read about on coolminiornot and other websites.

In an ideal world, you could simply use the flash on the camera rather than have to set up all these lamps. Unfortunately, a flash produces a single burst of really bright and harsh light which produces extremely hard edged shadows, and will often bleach the colours of a mini out completely, as you can see here:

Photography

With all of the setup in place, the next step is to use your camera to take a few photos of your chosen mini. You do not need a top of the range digital camera to take good photos if you use enough lighting. The camera I used to take the pictures of my Spellsinger cost me £30 in a Superdrug sale, and doesn't have any complex settings to adjust.

If your camera has one, set it to the macro setting, which has a symbol like a flower or tulip. This makes the camera better able to focus on small objects close to the lens. Also, as I explained earlier, the flash should be turned off. For best results, try and use as little zoom as possible, and get as close as possible to the mini before the camera cannot focus properly anymore. I took my photos about 8-10" away and my camera had no problems.

Even if you've used several lights, the camera will still have to use a very long shutter speed, so you should always rest your camera on something to obtain the sharpest image. You can use a tripod for this if you have one, but in my setup I just rested the camera against a pile of DVD cases, or on the surface of the desk itself. The important thing is that the camera stays as still as possible. If you cannot get your camera to focus close-up to mini, and have to take a photo from a long way off, make sure that you have the camera set to take the best resolution pictures it can so that there is sufficient detail shown on the model once it is resized on a computer.

At the end of all this, you should end up with a nicely in-focus and sharp image of your mini. And in best Blue Peter tradition here is one I made earlier! Because I used artificial lights, the colours in the photo are slightly off and yellow. This doesn't matter much at this stage, but the closer to reality the better.

Photo Editing

Now I can move the photo onto my computer where I can crop and resize it, as well as colour correct the image to get rid of the yellowness.

I use Adobe Photoshop to do my photo editing, though there are lots of other programs which will do the same thing without being so complex, and cameras often come supplied with a piece of editing software. If all else fails, any Microsoft Office program has limited editing features, and can crop and resize images, as well as change the brightness and contrast.

STOP PRESS!

Since writing this article, Adobe have launched some new online photo-editing software called Photoshop Express which has a lot of automated filters to touch up pics. I've not used it, but it looks quite good and very straightforward.

The first step is to crop your image to the right proportion. Cropping is simply removing the sections of an image you don't want so instead of an image of a Spellsinger and 18" of white paper, I just get the Spellsinger!

The next step is to adjust of the photo so it looks as close as possible in appearance on screen to how you see the real thing in front of you. Image editing programs like Photoshop have automatic filters which help you do all of this. The simplest way is to manually adjust the brightness and contrast of the image until you like the result. Contrast is simply a measure of the difference between the light and dark parts, so an image with a high contrast has really black shadows and really bright highlights, and one with a low contrast is grey and flat.

The final step of the process is to resize your image to a sensible size. Digital images have two attributes which determine their dimensions - size and resolution. Size is physically how many pixels there are in the picture, like the pieces of a jigsaw, and resolution is how small those pixels are in reality. Resolution is measured in 'dots per inch' or dpi, which shows how many of the photo's pixels make up one inch when printed on paper.

When viewing a picture on screen, only the size of the image determines how large the image will appear, resolution only comes in to play if you actually want to print your image out. For example, the two pictures below both look identical on screen, as they are both 250 pixels wide. However, if I printed them out, the 72dpi image would be about 9cm wide, while the 300dpi version would be a tiny 2.5cm wide due to its higher resolution.

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Its really up to you what size picture you want to show, and depends how big your monitor is.Â Mine displays 1200 pixels across, so a 400 pixel wide image is about a third of the full width of the monitor, which is fine for a man-sized mini, unless it has lots of detail.

The Result!

This is the final version of my autumn Spellsinger; I finished the picture off with a coloured background, by erasing around the mini in Photoshop, than adding the background underneath.Â This process is far easier if you have access to a graphic tablet like a Wacom, as it is difficult to get the required control with a mouse.

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