

When is your realism level good enough?

Realism is something that gets talked about often in model railroading. It's one of the ways we differentiate our modeling from playing with toy trains. But what is realism, exactly?

One of the first rules we learn as we become hobbyists is "It's my layout, and I make the rules." So that means we each get to set the standard for realism for ourselves.

Well known modeler and innovator Allen McClelland is famous for his "good enough" approach to modeling. That is, choose a standard you feel is attainable, then make every part of your layout reach that standard. His feeling was you don't want superdetailed locomotives and rolling stock rolling through a city made of cardboard boxes. Better to slack off a bit on the trains and put a little more effort into the scenery.

This is an excellent concept, but what if you really don't care about scenery? Other well known modelers, such as David Barrow, found their reward in operation, and they want that operation to be as realistic as possible. If the layout is a series of 2 x 4-foot tables painted tan with track on them, that's OK as long as the track allows you to operate the trains following realistic rules and regulations, copied from your favorite prototype.

When I was younger, and most of my modeling was of the armchair and imagination variety, I thought I wanted everything to be perfectly to scale. Seeing modelers building layouts in Proto87, which is HO scale taken to exacting standards of track and wheel geometry, I thought, this is it; this is how it should be done.

Then I started to think about the skill needed to handlay track to exact scale standards so wheels with scale sized flanges and treads would reliably roll on those rails. I realized I didn't have those skills, nor the patience to develop them.

Back to good enough.

That's what commercial track and wheelsets are to me. I'd like all of my rolling stock to be perfectly detailed, but the cost to buy ready-to-run models built to that standard is more than I want to spend, and the time to make enough freight cars is too much to me to devote. Old Athearn "blue box" cars and Accurail kits are good enough.

I also thought it would be nice to have grass made of individual leaves, not to mention the foliage on my trees, but that's time and effort I could spend elsewhere. A few



highly detailed "hero" trees in the foreground is fine. The rest will have to be good enough.

Now, of course, everyone's good enough is different. Modelers such as Pelle Søbørg and Andrew Dodge have levels of good enough I can't reach even on my best days. Where do you stand? Let us know!

Model Railroader

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