

Small Layout Design - Beyond the Timesaver

by Byron Henderson

The traditional small layout has been a switching puzzle (like the Timesaver or the Inglenook) or a simple oval design. But there are many alternatives that offer more-engaging operating challenge or better-looking model railroads.

What makes a layout fun?

Game and puzzle designers talk about two kinds of challenge: sequence challenges that require specific steps in a particular progression; and ordering challenges that offer multiple paths to a solution. John Allen's Timesaver switching puzzle (1966) is a railroad-themed sequencing game that demands a specific chain of steps -- in essence, the player is moving an empty space around.

While this can be fun for a while for some, it is not a simulation of railroading. Alternative small layout designs offer more of the elements that make a layout fun to operate:

- Diversity and variety of tasks (Ordering *and* sequencing challenges)
- Unpredictability
- "Fair" challenge
- Some simulation of real railroading

Simulating a railroad

A combination of ordering and sequencing challenges, such as both industry tracks and a small classification yard, may offer the best opportunity for long-term ops enjoyment in a small space. A classic small design of this type is Linn Wescott's "Switchman's Nightmare" (1956).



about 16" X 72" in HO with #6 turnouts, 30" min. radius

Best design practices from larger layouts may be extended to smaller spaces as well. These ideas include:

- Staging
- Major industries
- Interchange
- Prototype inspiration

With thoughtful design, space for industries and other scenery may allow the small layout to be more visually appealing.

Fine-scale operations

Simulating real-life elements such as served-industry shifts, seasonality, local ordinances (like keeping street grade crossings clear), crew roles (allowing time for imaginary brakemen to walk, for example), and "sure

spots" (specific placement of rail cars at doors, spouts, or dumps) adds significantly to the challenge and fun of a small layout. This offers much more long-term fun than the puzzle challenge of moving cars around the traditional switching puzzle.

Designing for long-term satisfaction

In fact, one of the things that makes a layout fun and not frustrating is providing the elements that the real railroads build-in to their trackage: sufficient switching lead lengths, adequate run-arounds, and trackage to support switching and sorting. This often requires little more space than the traditional puzzle, yet provides more engaging operations.

Staging or interchange is another interesting element to add to small layouts, providing a suggestion of the national rail network beyond the benchwork.

Suggestions

Real-world locales can provide added realism and operating inspiration. A focus on simulating railroading instead of artificial puzzle challenge may lead to longer-term satisfaction. Small layouts needn't be only tail-chasers or puzzles -- they can be fun and interesting!

References

Layout Design SIG -- www.ldsig.org

LDSIG Member Services; 668 Snyder Hill Road; Lititz, PA 17543

Operations SIG -- www.opsig.org

OpSIG; Box 872; Arlington Heights, IL 60006

Books (alphabetical by author)

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How to Operate your Model Railroad by Bruce A. Chubb (Kalmbach, 1977 -- out of print)

Realistic Model Railroad Operation by Tony Koester (Kalmbach, 2003)

Small, Smart, and Practical Track Plans by Iain Rice (Kalmbach, 2000)

For more info on this clinic ...

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