

## Commercial sculpting by Alan Ball

I should note immediately that this article includes quotes from several other people, and I don't claim that I initiated the whole thing, or even all the ideas here.

I'm not sure which bits are who's now, but the whole thing is from a long discussion that was held on [www.timelinesforum.com](http://www.timelinesforum.com) and has included some of the input from the discussion that followed as they added greatly to the value of the original thoughts. I'm sure that it's interesting to those who either think about starting their own company or sculpting for production, so I hope those that I have quoted will forgive me.

Okay, since I have recently been getting a few questions asking about commercial sculpting and how to go about it, I thought that I would jot down a few of my thoughts on the matter and this is purely my viewpoint, others will have other thoughts on the matter manufacturers will certainly have horror stories to tell about sculptors that they have worked with (as will sculptors).

First question to ask yourself is, do you work and release figures on your own? .....and then, do you start a new company to do this?

To answer these first questions, you have to be able to address the following, can you cast? if not, can you get a reliable and good caster?.

If you can cast, are you prepared for the time it takes up and the costs of doing it commercially?

Unless you are willing to wait to get your money back, and can afford to keep releasing figures which are all taking time to realise the investment back then this isn't for you (If you are lucky, then you will be an instant hit, but this is rarer than people think.....most of the people who tell you they "must have" your figure will by the time it's released, or they see it have something else on their "must have" list).

If you don't want to go down this road, and just want to sculpt for existing companies then there are other considerations. Who there are plenty of companies out there, some have good reputations, some bad. Do you want to be associated with a company that has a bad reputation...will some of that bad reputation rub off on you?



### **Good companies**

There are a lot of them too.....do they cast in Metal or resin? (if metal, can you make the required adjustments to your sculpt to make sure that it doesn't "shrink" too much in the casting process?). Look at their products to judge how well they cast, and the sort of engineering their figures need to make it cast able by that company, there is a lot of variation in what some companies are capable of ...and how they like a figure "cut".....remember, it's easier to have a lot of detail on each piece, and make the parts as few as possible, but that will mean that the company will have to renew the moulds more often.

### **Accuracy**

This is important, and a lot depends on whether the company is generally easy going, specific, or very specific or control freaks on how they want the figure to look and how it should be shown.

I have had companies send me illustrations of a ACW figure, and ask me to make a Napoleonic figure in the pose.....wearing all the bags, straps and other equipment, now sensibly, Napoleonic clothing is much more restrictive than ACW clothing, so it just cannot work in all cases.....if the company is very specific about the look, then you either say no, try to change their minds or do it to the best of your ability.....your choice.

Of course, you should always try and do your own research, and if there is something that doesn't fit, tell them about it .....though this doesn't always work

If they are being general in their request for a figure ( We want a "French Napoleonic Dragoon charging on a horse" for instance ) and leaving the rest up to you ..then you have to work harder at making sure you are right ..... not always as easy as it sounds given that most companies have a timeframe in mind , and want to release your figure at a specific show ( usually within a shorter time period than you would like to check on all the details fully ).

### **Your good name**

Once you have committed to do something, you have to do it, and as near to the required date as possible. The manufacturer will then have to get it cast; painted for box art and packaged .....these all take time, and are costs they have to bear, on top of your fee for the sculpting .....and hope to recover as soon as possible by releasing your figure at a big show.

### **Money**

If you haven't worked with a company before , it's a possibly a sensible idea to ask for a deposit up front....that shows commitment on their behalf, though of course, this means that they have to trust you to do the thing and your good name is on the line here , so there is plenty of scope for discussion possible , and you can't be too uptight about the whole thing or you will end up losing the commission...remember it's easy for you to go on any and all sites and shout about being screwed, so it's unlikely that any company would try and not pay for your work and keep the figure .....if it all goes pear shape, you will at least have the sculpt back in your hands .

Just make sure that it's clear the sculpt remains your property until paid for.

I have seen all sorts of prices quoted for Sculptors, mostly they are rumour, and bare little relationship to reality, so don't get carried away by visions of what you can earn, or feel that someone is ripping you off if you don't get offered the fabulous numbers that you heard about from X or Y in the bar or on a Forum somewhere.

You have to look at a realistic figure that makes you happy to do the piece, realising that the Company will have costs over and above your sculpt costs, and unless they sell thousands of the figure, they are not likely to make too much profit from your individual piece .

The better known as a sculptor you are, and the higher your reputation (for being honest, delivering a good product within an acceptable timescale, and not creating too many problems) the higher (relatively) people are willing to pay for your work ...someone starting out as a sculptor, with no track record, is always going to be a risk until they prove themselves, so they will be offered less as a general rule.

So, don't try and charge too much (where you cost things is your own business, these are just general observations), if you try to charge too much, you may simply lose the commission, or maybe you will sell one sculpt, but it will be a time before the figure has paid for itself, so they won't come back for some time (if at all).

Charge too little and you will soon become disillusioned at the whole thing .....people will certainly come back for more, and quickly, but the whole business will soon lose its attraction for you. Just remember that you are never going to "make a million" at this, and go for a sensible price, which allows you to keep working.

Where the happy medium is, I can't tell you, it's a personal choice that you have to make, and probably the most difficult the first time you make it ...look on it as a rite of passage.

### **Critiques**

While working , privately send pictures to people you trust and ask for comments .....read them and take them in when they arrive , if the comment is fair and would make the thing better ....bite the bullet and make the change now...don't wait till you have finished and it's all too late .

I find it also useful to send pictures to the company who will be taking the figure, so they can also make comments and foresee any problems that they may have.

### **Changes**

It does happen from time to time that you will be asked to change things on a sculpt, the pose or small details .....this is normal and to be expected, and I have to say that as a general rule the changes asked for usually make the sculpt better. Remember, it's not in the company's interest to try and make the thing worse.....and they have to be happy and positive about the sculpt.....believe in it .....that way they will try and sell it (rather than just have it sitting on their table), it also means that they feel happier about using you in the future, so if the first sculpt sells, they may well come back for more.

### **Standing by your work**

Okay, you have done the piece, after making some changes that you weren't entirely happy with (well what were you to do, refuse, and be left holding the figure you wouldn't have done in the first place, losing all that time and effort for nothing, and in the process getting a bad reputation for letting down the Company who had it slated as their release for such & such a show).

What you don't do is go on the nearest website and tell everyone that you don't like the figure, or that it's inaccurate because you had to make changes because the company demanded them (there will be enough people on the internet to tell you how wrong the whole thing is anyway).

It's easier not to comment at all as a general rule. Even if you are completely happy with everything, a simple thank you to nice mail or posts is easiest.....Most of it is pretty obvious, but there are learning curves to go through and as you say Communication is the paramount way to cut down on misunderstandings and people feeling unsure or used .....which is usually solely down to misunderstanding rather than any other reason.

By the way, if you are thinking along these lines. No you don't set the price with regards to research done or required obviously sometimes a figure that on the surface is obscure can turn out to be simple to research (because you have the books already) and a figure that should be simple is a pain (because you don't have the books, and can't find them .

You should be doing research on every figure anyway; and that price is factored in when giving a quote ...you cannot go back and add on extra once you realise that it's not the stroll in the park that you thought it would be.

You never rely solely on what is supplied by someone else. So if in doubt, factor in a certain amount for research in your basic prices and try to keep to a consistent price for your figures...some you will win on , and some you will lose ( on the amount of time spent researching that is ) the big thing is to keep your pricing expectations simple .....People aren't really interested in seeing a sliding scale of pricing based on factors that they really don't want to be bothered with.

In the end it's your responsibility, and you have to stand by what you have done (even if you made some small changes to please the people giving the commission).

Estimating how long a figure is going to take is always guesswork, you never know when you will hit some kind of wall that stops you dead in the water .....sculpting problems , re-working stuff because you aren't happy with what you've done , Personal problems , illness, running out of putty , just not feeling like it ...anything can throw you off. All you can do is try to be realistic with yourself, give a best guess estimate and try to meet that after a time, the guesswork becomes tighter, and you will find that it gets easier to give an estimate, but you can never take away the last 10% of uncertainty.

Once you do something commercial, it's important to remember that it's fair game for everyone to tear apart.....people who were telling you how good and "Marvellous" your stuff was while you were doing it for yourself will treat you as a different animal once to go commercial ...no matter that you still think of yourself as a hobbyist who was lucky enough to be asked to do something for casting. You are now fair game and have to have a thick enough skin not to be put off by any comments.

Lastly, ask for a couple of casts of your figure as part of the price, and be happy with that. You have to learn to let go and not be too possessive about the piece, once it's done and you have been paid .....it's done, move on. What happens to it after it leaves your hands is not your business and you have to live with that.

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### **Who picks your subjects?**

Poses? Is it the manufacturer who provides you with the subject matter and desired pose? Do they provide artwork or just a description to work from? How about references? Is it assumed that the sculptor will get his own references, or does the manufacturer provide that? If the sculptor chooses the subject matter and pose, then what happens if the manufacturer doesn't think it will be commercially viable?

Different manufacturers have different ways of working , though there is usually a bit of give and take some are very specific in what they want and the way it should be shown.....they can be very enthusiastic about a subject and have very defined views on both uniform and the look of it when worn by a particular subject.

In at least one case, I have had to fight to get at least a semblance of anatomical accuracy into the figure ... not totally successfully because the guy had a very specific vision of what he wanted ...was very enthusiastic and would have been disappointed and felt let down if he didn't get at least some of "the look" he wanted.

This type of thing is something you aren't always aware of until you start to send "in progress" photos and start to get feedback.

Time for enough research is always a problem though, a lot of the time I have to rely on research provided as the person commissioning a piece will have a deadline , or show that they want to release a kit for (Something near 90% of the people I work for have a deadline and a show in mind for release). In those cases, where there is ambiguity or a lack of information on a specific item, then you have to go with the best information you have.

I always try and send in progress pictures of a kit to the manufacturer, and get feedback, that way we all know what is going on and there is a chance to make changes or weed out problems early (there are always things that slip through though) as John said sometimes you are forced into decisions due to either to technical reasons or monetary reasons and compromise is required on both sides.

Best of all is when a manufacturer asks for a subject, and we just sit down and discuss a pose .that way we both get the input into what it is , and what it's doing .....and enthused about the subject. Sculpting usually starts pretty well as soon as everything is finalised (to meet the deadline. Usually not very far in the future ...and of course they need time to get it cast, painted, boxed and "ready to go").

### **Research**

More on this important Topic.

It depends on what the manufacturer is looking for. If it's a specific figure in a specific pose, and he wants the guy to have a specific piece of equipment or clothing then it's up to him to be specific I think.

I will normally check my own references and get back if there are anomalies or things don't look right ( however, it's normally "please do it as I described").

Other times I am left to do the research (most people do have quite a bit of Info on the shelves etc.) and it's only the pose and general idea that is agreed with the manufacturer.

Of course, when we do one off figures and a manufacturer picks it up , then it's all down to us

### **A big problem?**

The biggest problem I find is when I am sent an illustration of a pose, and another of the uniform. Sometimes it's simply not realistic for someone wearing a set of armour, or an 18th/19th Century uniform to be in a very relaxed or animated pose, the type and style of clothing would restrict the guys movement .....especially if he has all his equipment and straps on and I am being asked to have him in a pose of a figure in shirt sleeves.

Breaking the figure for casting is largely experience, and talking to each manufacturer (casting and mould making is largely experience as well, and you have to understand what the guy can do).

Normally I am asked to do as much on the figure as possible , to save on the moulds, casting plugs and complication, however, I am also asked sometimes to make the figure in as many parts as possible, with an eye to having "spare parts" and giving conversion potential. The problem with this comes when I am asked to make "a set of legs "that can be used on several figures.

Of course this sounds fine until you realise that the Torso's to go with that "Set of legs" are all going to be doing different things and wearing different uniforms. And then the arms and heads are also all different and with different poses, and imperatives in mind, that's where things fall apart and sculpts can start to look odd ...it doesn't always work when the bits and pieces are assembled as different figures.

### **Shrinkage**

Can vary, but as sculptor, I try to make allowances for it. Not always as successfully as I would like.

It's normally one of the first questions a sculptor will ask is it to be Metal or Resin!

Normally when working for a Resin casting, there shouldn't be much (if any) shrinkage, but if the guy doing the casting "Squeezes" the mould in any way during the process (...for instance a rubber band holding the mould together being too tight will distort the casting a bit ), then there can be loss of bulk. And that can be hard to allow for as the amount of "squeeze" will tend to vary each time (unless there is a consistency in exactly what he is doing to Squeeze).

When working for a metal cast, then the average shrink can be as much as 7%, depending on the part or size of the piece being cast .....generally, the "loss" will occur in the thicker parts of the piece torso, and body area, with the arms and legs being less affected.

In simplified terms the shrinkage is generally caused because when creating a Vulcanised mould, for metal casting the mould is put under a lot of pressure. This is needed to embed the subject and fill all the details with rubber.

Once released from this pressure.....being Rubber, the mould will come back a touch.

When making a casting, the mould is spun, and molten metal introduced, in a perfect world, the centrifugal force of the spin would force the metal into the mould at the same pressure used to create the mould (forcing the rubber to take the exact dimensions of the original piece).however this is rarely the case, and so you have a "shrinkage ".

With the smaller pieces, the mould tends to have less room the bounce back , and it is less evident than on a larger mass ( Torso's etc.) and so you get the variation in shrinkage over a figure and it's composite parts .

It's not an exact science ( the modelling to make allowances that is ) as different casters will use different spin speeds, different metals, different rubber, etc. so there are a lot of variables and all you can do is your best. As I mentioned before, look at Kits from a specific manufacturer, see how things actually look, then ask what they normally ask their Sculptors to allow for shrinkage, never think it's not worth asking.

Weapons don't normally suffer from too much shrinkage, as they tend to be pretty thin and small anyway....the larger the scale the more you have to consider it, but as a general rule you can make true scale weapons , it's only the thickness that will shrink, not the actual size.

The problem is that if you have taken shrinkage into account in the figure, and it doesn't work exactly as you planned, a true scale weapon will still look out of scale.

There is also the consideration that some producers want "large 54mm" and some want "true 54mm" some of these figures can be almost 60mm , but if the weapon is true 54mm ( because that's the base measurements you are working to , it will look small , on the other hand, if you compensate with the weapons as well to fit the figure, it will be out of scale and look odd if you pose different figures together ), it's something that always causes problems and I tend to let the producer tell me what they want in this respect as whatever I decided to do would probably be wrong in their eyes.

Something I have also come across is people's expectations of weapon sizes.....people tend to expect weapons to be smaller than they are in a lot of cases, and can think that the weapon you have done is too large, however a trip to a good museum with a lot of old weapons will soon show you that a lot of them are a lot bulkier and awkward to carry or use than the mere measurements and dimensions would seem to indicate, that's not always apparent when looking at a figure. Even a Thompson machine gun for instance, apart from weighing quite a bit, has a lot of protrusions and hard angles that dig into your hips, back or legs as you walk, making it a pain to carry over a distance , and a lot of earlier weapons are even more stressful to simply have about your person

Anything less than about half a mm will not cast .or at least not consistently ( hence the thickness of straps and other small pieces sometimes ), so you have to have at least that thickness at the edge of a sword to get a clean line and something that has a bit of strength that is not prone to bending if you simply look at it

a point is no problem, but may not always fill right to the end if it is very sharp and tapered , so it is easier to sometimes make things a bit less tapered to ensure that it casts well.

You are right about heating the moulds first by the way, that's one of the nice things about casting in metal, you can cast enough to get the mould warm, and the first castings just go back in the pot to be re-melted

The bottom line is "communication". Exchanging sketches to develop ideas, exchanging e-mails and in-progress pictures at least once a week will keep the troubles away.