

3D ART APPLICATION

Blender 2.33a

The 3D-modelling button-fest is back with the facility to create games reinstated. **Jono Bacon** fires up his engine to give it a test.

BUYER INFO

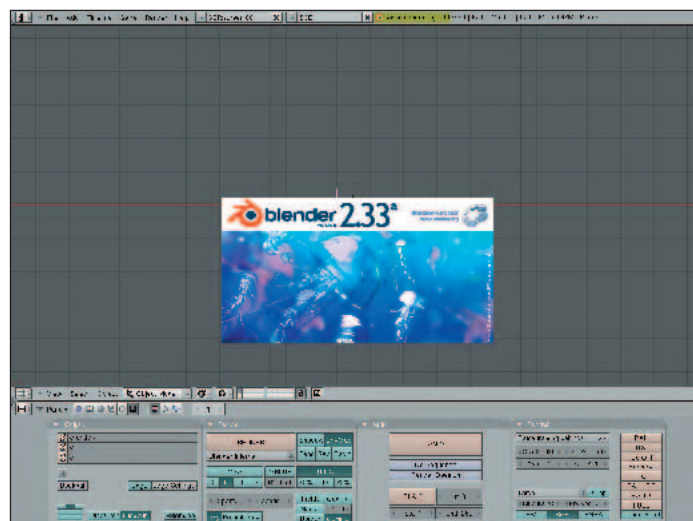
Open Source 3D modeller, renderer and game constructor. See *Realsoft 3D* and the pricey *Maya 6* too.

■ **DEVELOPER** www.blender.org/
 ■ **PRICE** Free
 ■ **WEB** www.blender3d.org/

For quite some time, the *Blender* 3D modelling system has lacked its game engine. The venerable game creation system garnered much acclaim from critics and users alike in the way it greatly assisted the creation of interactive 3D games, demos and grey circles jumping over cubes. Unfortunately, when the *Blender* sources were released under the GPL, the game engine needed to be removed due to some closed-source code that was included in the collision detection library. This code has since been GPLed – to the great delight of John Carmack wannabes everywhere. The 2.33 release represents the first stable re-release of the engine.

Making games

Upon downloading the feverishly easy-to-install *Blender* ('unzip and run' pretty much sums the process up), the first thing I did was to fire up the game engine and have a play with it. The first thing that struck me at this point was how much cleaner the game engine is



Too many buttons, or sleek interface? You decide.

with the new interface. The often-clunky feel of the old interface really affected the game engine with some tasks, but the new interface really makes the engine shine. After I had created a few simple scenes and interactions, I then loaded up some extensive pre-written games that worked fine in the last release with the game engine intact (2.25). I was pleasantly surprised to see that everything worked flawlessly, and I also got a feeling of a distinct speed improvement. Another nice addition was a working mouse wheel in the engine; a feature that will be instantly

appreciated by anyone who has ever used this area of *Blender*.

Other than actually making the game engine work to the same level as the 2.25 release, the coders have not actually brought anything new to the engine. If you were expecting a raft of new features, you will be sadly disappointed. The good news is that work can now begin on refining the engine and getting features such as the *Flash* and *X3D* exporters working. These features (particularly *Flash* export) will no doubt bring a number of new users to *Blender*.

New features

Luckily, the game engine is not the only reason to blitz that old *Blender* and trade it in for a newer model; there have been some other great improvements too. The most notable feature is Ambient Occlusion; an effect that can really add to the photorealism of a scene. For those of you who have not been privy to the last few releases of *Blender*, the developers have integrated the *Yafray* raytracing engine (www.yafray.org/) as well as improving *Blender's* rendering engine itself. This has resulted in incredibly photorealistic scenes. Ambient Occlusion has helped push this further and incorporate even more realistic light distribution among objects.



Another interesting feature in the latest release is the new procedural textures that can be applied to objects. These special textures are calculated by the rendering system (as opposed to being applied like normal textures). This was an area where *Blender* was previously quite limited; and while there is not a great amount of choice in terms of procedural textures at the moment, there is a lot of worthwhile work going on in this area.

One final point to note in terms of improvements is the fact that *Blender* is most definitely improving in terms of interface enhancements. With each progressive release we have seen tweaks here and there that are not only making *Blender* more powerful, but more intuitive. While there is still much to be done to completely remove *Blender's* oft-quoted stigma of being somewhat incomprehensible to use, it is great to see real and visible work being performed in this area.

Conclusion

Though the game engine is entirely reminiscent of its older relative, it is good to see the old-world *Blender* of the past finally being binned in preference of the newer, more desirable beast – it is going to be interesting to see how the engine further develops and improves. I have a suspicion that *Blender* is rapidly beginning to turn into a complete media tool: people are looking to push it towards creating vector graphics and scalable environments, in addition to the normal button-pushing involved in creating stills and animations. **LXF**

LINUX FORMAT VERDICT

INSTALLATION	10/10
PERFORMANCE	9/10
EASE OF USE	7/10
FEATURES	9/10

Improving by leaps and bounds – just when you sit back to admire the work of the community, yet another new release emerges with some killer functionality.

RATING 9/10



Hard to believe that this is just *Blender* bending a few cones and spheres!

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