



Poser 5

Character Animation Software
Curious Labs, \$299

By Chris Manners

Poser 5 from Curious Labs (www.curiouslabs.com) is a substantial upgrade that incorporates a wide array of new features and workflow enhancements. As a program that facilitates the creation of animated 3D characters that can be rendered and composited with other video sources, Poser 5 remains the easiest way for video editors to generate realistic 3D figures. Given that the application includes pre-boned models, as well as a host of tools that include a walk designer, the program is a solid bet for those who don't have the time or inclination to use a high-end 3D package to create realistic human forms.

But there is one important caveat for existing power users. Although the program has included almost all the capabilities of the Poser Pro Pack extension kit, it lacks one important feature: the ability to export and host Poser scenes in Maya, 3ds max, LightWave, and Cinema 4D. A third-party plug-in option, BodyStudio from Reiss Studio (www.reiss-studio.com), will let you import Poser characters into Maya or 3ds max. But this is a \$179 package for 3ds max and a \$299 option for Maya users. Curious Labs is currently working with other third-party

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developers to implement plug-in support for other mainstream 3D packages, so LightWave and Cinema 4D users who have become accustomed to importing animated Poser characters as an element of a final animation created in these programs will have to wait for this feature.

Moving between rooms

The most noticeable change to Poser 5 is that the program's functionality is now divided up into a series of rooms rather than integrated within a single interface. By default, the program opens in the Pose room; the tabs for the other rooms lie at the head of the interface. This initial space is where most of the basic work in creating a scene and animation takes place. You can add, manipulate, and animate figures and props here, as well as apply lighting, magnets, waves, and wind force. Once you've added figures, clothing, and props from the Library palette, the Pose room provides all of the object animation controls, as well as the Poser's easy-to-use walk designer. From the Animation palette, it's possible to create keyframes and animate both body movements and facial expressions. Poser now supports multiple camera views and includes a point-at function to track motion, as well as animatable camera focal lengths. It also features a Graph palette, where you can control animation by editing keyframes and modifying interpolation methods between keyframes. Poser 5 provides linear, spline, and constant interpolation techniques, while at the same time allows for the mixing of these methods by using the break spline command.

You can color and texture objects in the new Materials room by using and creating node-based shaders. After creating a new shader node, you build a shader tree by adding additional subnodes. The program's prebuilt textures in the Materials library include procedural textures and fractal-based nodes, and the application supports image maps, animated textures, math nodes, displacement maps, and ray-traced refraction and reflection. For 2D textures, the program also supports the importation of image bitmaps in standard file formats.

In the Face room, you can import facial photos to help create new characters and generate texture maps. As an alternative to importing facial maps, Poser includes a tool called Texture Variation that lets you determine parameters such as facial color, ethnicity, age, and gender. After altering these

In this dual-monitor setup, the Pose room can be seen on the left-hand screen. Dynamic hair shows up as a series of dots until rendered. The right-hand screen displays tools available in the Pose room, including the Graph and Animation palettes, the Walk Designer, Hierarchy window, and the Parameters/Properties palette.

parameters and creating your basic character attributes, Poser generates a new image map for your character. On the right of the interface, however, lies a tool for much more powerful customization: Morph Putty. This tool lets you interactively sculpt morph targets in realtime and directly create facial types and expressions by clicking and pulling vertices on the model.

Poser's new physics engine adds considerable power to the application, giving you access to features such as collision

Score: ◆◆◆◆◇

Pros

Considerably more powerful than previous versions. Strong, interactive facial modeling tools. New physics engine adds stronger modeling capabilities and dynamics.

Cons

Pro Pack's 3D program integration is only available through third-party plug-ins. Cluttered screen means dual-monitor setup is almost a necessity. Materials room isn't intuitive.

Bottom Line

Poser 5 exhibits a huge leap in sophistication. Unless the Pro Pack export feature is a core part of your workflow, the upgrade adds tons of useful new functionality.

System Requirements

Windows: 500 MHz Pentium class or compatible; English-only versions of Windows 98se, 2000, ME, or XP; 128 MB system RAM; 500 MB hard disk space; 24-bit color display. Macintosh: 500 MHz G3 processor; OS X 10.2 or later; 256 MB system RAM; 500 MB hard disk space; 24-bit color display.

REVIEWS Poser 5

detection, gravity, and wind effects. These capabilities, while somewhat difficult to fine-tune, can have a dramatic impact on a scene's realism.

Poser 5 also includes a new Hair room, where it's possible to grow strand-based hair. After choosing a set of polygons to

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grow hair upon, you create guide hairs. Then you can style the hair using parameters such as the width and number of hairs, as well as varying degrees of curliness or straightness. You can also include dynamics such as gravity and springiness to add to the realism of the hair. The best way to experiment with these tools is to adapt one of the pregrown hair presets that are provided with the program.

The Cloth room is a little less straightforward, but its core functionality is to let you create dynamic cloth. Poser's new physics capabilities can create and calculate collision objects so that the cloth can wrap around objects. The program's library also includes a variety of conforming

clothing that easily attaches to a character and will synchronize and move with the parent model.

The Setup room, first introduced with the Pro Pack for Poser 4, further provides a slew of figure creation tools. The workspace is designed to facilitate the creation of bones, joints, hierarchies, and inverse kinematics chains. Here, you can set rotation limits for bones and either import a figure from another 3D application or modify an existing one. Because Poser 5 includes polygon and vertex picking and grouping tools, it's possible to import 3D geometry, break it into parts, attach bones, and then generate and animate new figures.

Poser 5 also features an updated rendering engine, FireFly, that performs subdivision surface rendering of polygons and polygon smoothing, as well as motion blur and depth-of-field effects. In addition, FireFly also includes raytraced reflections and refraction. The Poser 4 renderer is included for draft modes because it's considerably faster than the new, high-quality renderer. At the same time, Poser 5 easily outputs still images and AVI/QuickTime movie files, while also supporting Flash and BVH motion data capture/export.

A dramatic upgrade

The new physics engine means that Poser 5 has achieved a leap in its level of sophistication. The interactive facial sculpting tools,

dynamic Hair and Cloth rooms, and materials capabilities strongly extend Poser's functionality with one of the most dramatic upgrades that Curious Labs has realized. This wealth of new features does mean the program has a vast array of dialog boxes that almost necessitate a dual-monitor setup to avoid screen clutter. Poser 5's only real weak spot is its lack of native integration with

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high-end 3D packages, though the BodyStudio plug-in is handy for Maya and 3ds max users, and Curious Labs says that additional export plug-ins from its third-party developers are expected soon. All of which means that this particular upgrade delivers a big bang for the buck. ■

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