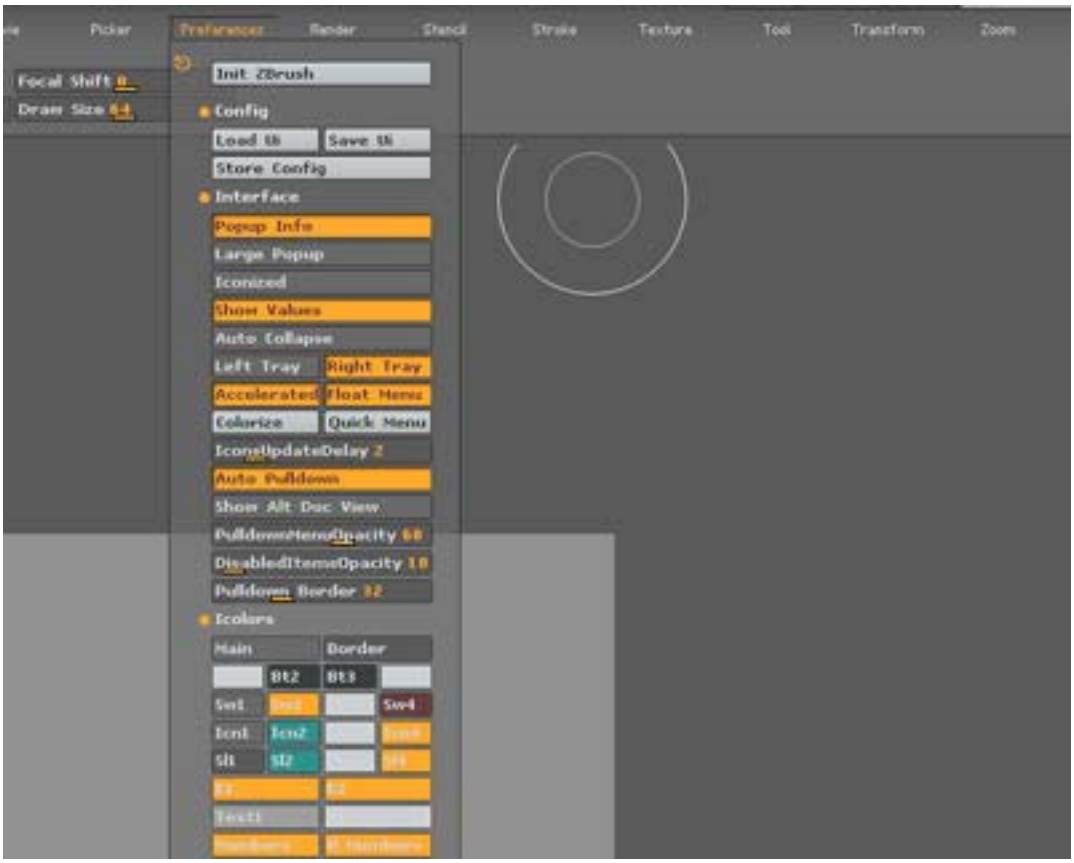
Pixologic ZBrush 2 Review
Lamont Gilkey, 07 October 2004

Introduction

Z Brush marks the second version of Pixologic's amazing modeling package. This version boasts vast improvements in user interface, modeling and object management, new materials and textures among other features. There are also new masking options, brushes and strokes at artists' disposal. Out of all the features, some of the most exciting are Normal/Displacement maps along with Zspheres. Word of mouth and countless testimonials plague forums across the net about how great this software is.



First impressions

When I first launched Z Brush, I was given an option to dive right in, or head over to tutorials and documentation. Starting up the Z Script driven tutorials really helped me get along and answer any questions that would have come up. I was very much pleased how

Pixologic took the initiative to get users adjusted by providing top-notch documentation and training material, both on and off-line. At first the interface bothered me with the roll-over menu systems, often getting in my way. But this can be turned off, allowing me to swish my mouse around in a won-ton manner, without menu exploding everywhere. What also pleased me is how well the interface can be customized, from color, menu placement and icons, there is a configuration for everyone.

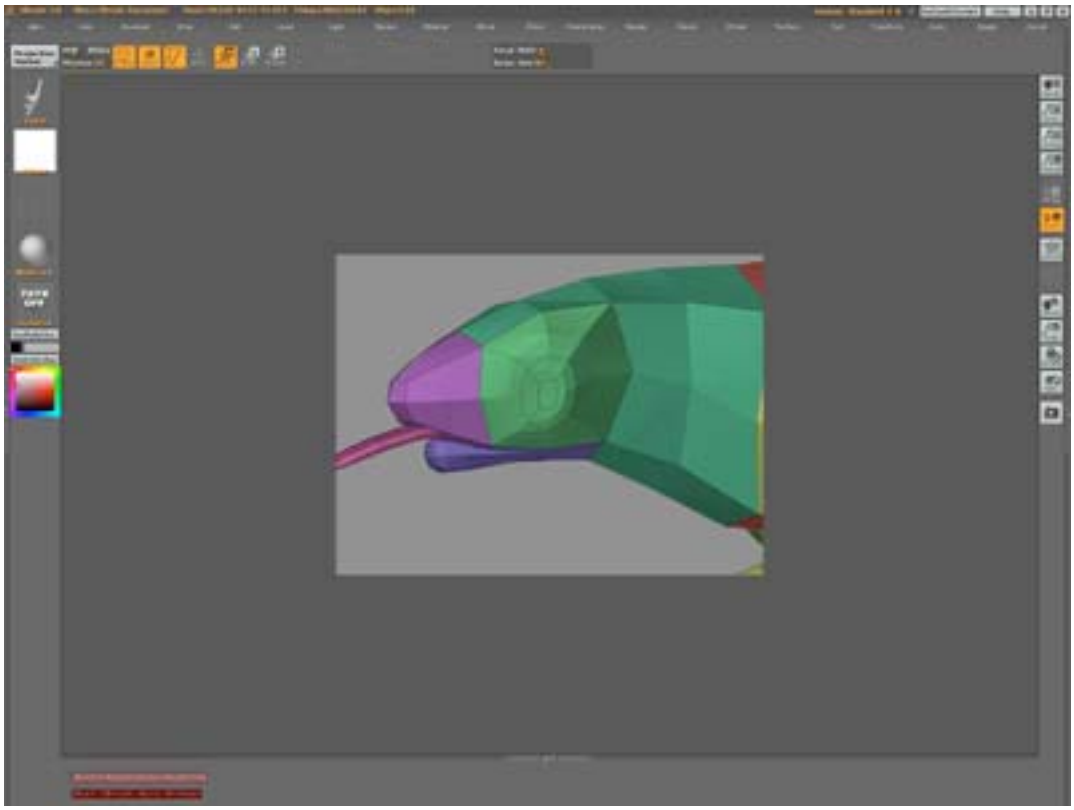
Features

The Grand-daddy feature that's going to bring the boys/girls to the yard is the multi-resolution mesh and displacement features. You can bring in a displacement map, or generate the high-poly mesh within Z Brush. I found that starting with Z-Spheres to create my model, and building up the mesh to be more comfortable than importing a displacement. And since Z-Brush's tools behave in such a fluid manner, I was able to generate astonishing details with little effort. Just by taking a look at other more accomplished Z-Brush users artwork on Pixologic's web page, should give you a glimpse of the tool-set mastery.

I took affinity to Z Spheres after learning more of what they can do. Think of it as what Metaballs should have been. Being able to block out a models/drawings with interconnecting spheres is something we all are accustomed to. And this is a major component of Z Brush's workflow that drives home the term "sculpting". Creating high-poly models using these as your base and all the while being able to switch back and fourth for preview is another remarkable feature. The user has remarkable control over the mesh at every point of creation. The model can be toggled back and fourth by tapping the "a" key, giving you the skin of your Z-Sphere's. The resolution of this preview can be determined by the user which I thought was very clever.

As I mentioned earlier, I described modeling in Z Brush feels a lot like sculpting. Version 2 brings in new brushes and tools to sculpt your mesh. This is why I was able to emerge myself so quickly, and why many artist are able to create stunning work. The new brushes add more precision and bring some techniques found in other packages to the Z Brush arsenal. The tools added give the user more control and precision to create minute details, such as the

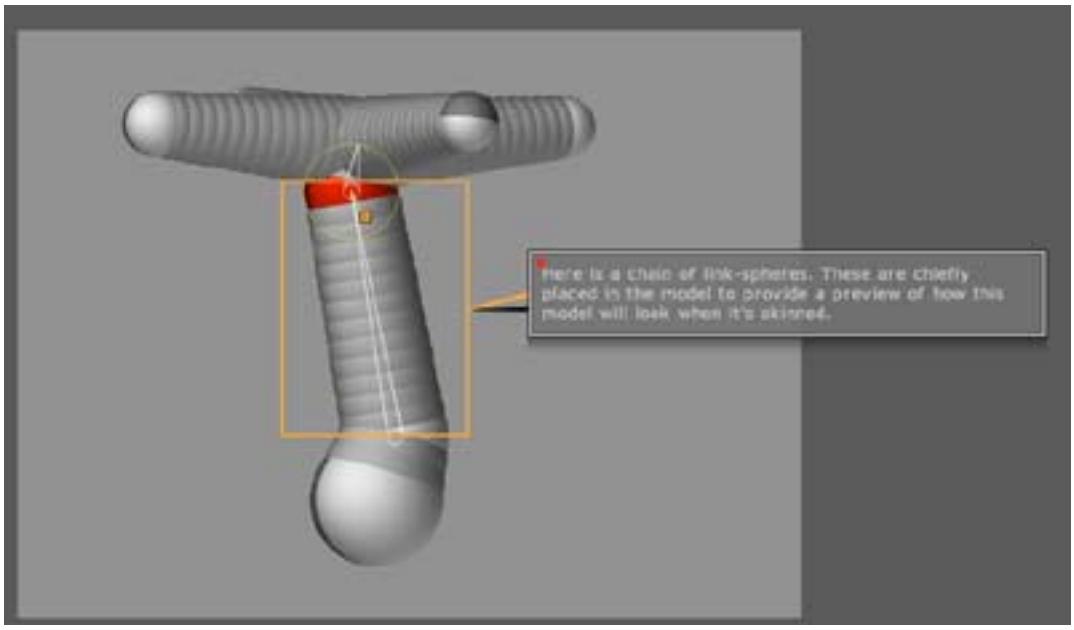
Layer brush which is by far my favorite, let's the user quickly raise or lower the mesh by a defined amount. Honestly I feel that Z Brush 2 can bridge the gap between a traditional media artist and the DCC artist. Once a traditional artist overcomes the input method of using a mouse and keyboard, they would find a lot of the tools familiar. Not to replace their medium of choice, but rather complement it by bringing their traditional skills to the DCC world.



The full impact of Z Brush's modeling/sculpting features would not felt if the viewport was brought to a crawl when the model hit's the 100,000's range and beyond... way beyond to the millions! Subdivision surfaces combined with displacement maps are achievable in the viewport if your machine can handle it. Real-time feedback is a must when you're sculpting detail into the mesh. This is one of my favorite features, the responsiveness of the tools in real-time with insane amounts of polys thrown at it. And if things do get a bit sluggish, you can hide geometry in a myriad of ways.

Another great feature is the outstanding way Pixologic has incorporated teaching a new user. ZScript driven tutorials are like no other, it's like an instructor has taken over your mouse, guiding

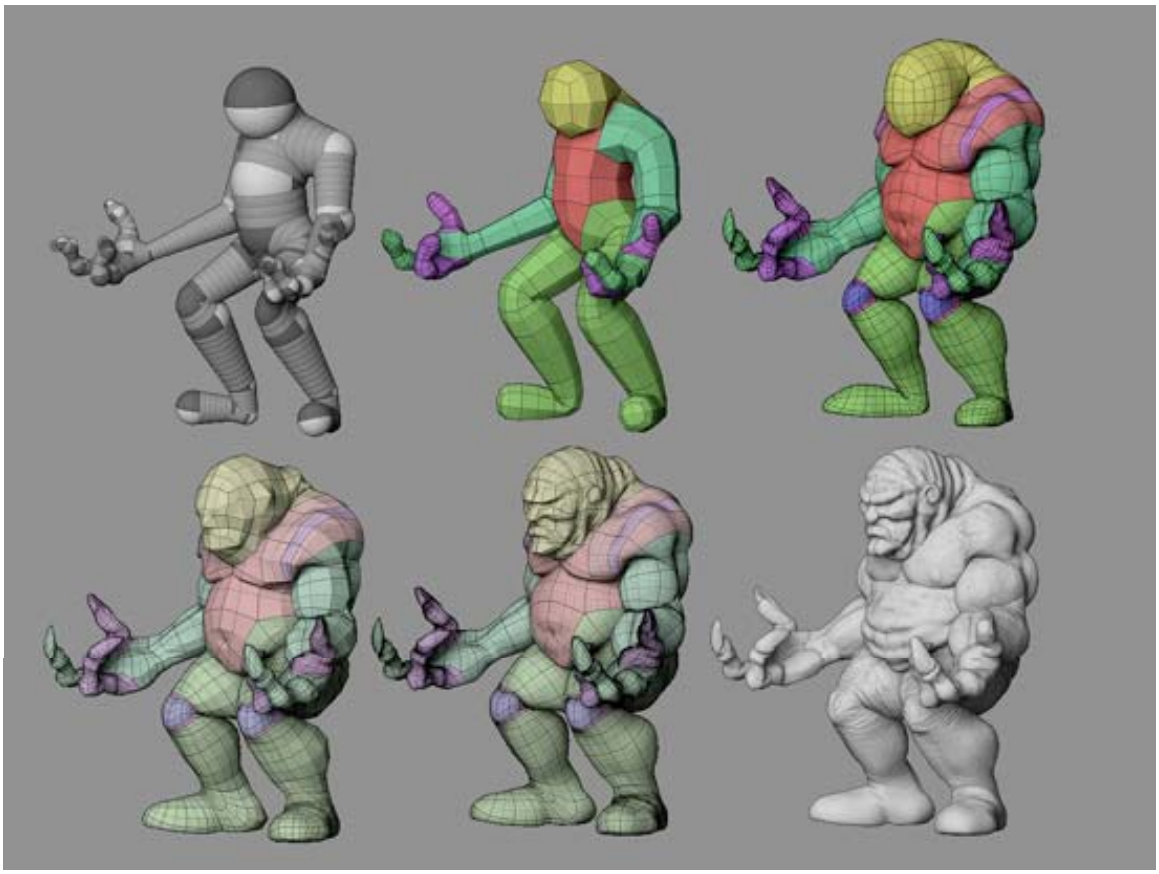
you through each and every feature. ZScript opens the doors for people who want to learn and teach by recording all your actions. For instance: A user can create a head sculpting tutorial, post the ZScript on the net, and another user can then download then run it, guiding him/her through the process. The recording of actions can also lead to the development of tools to be shared by the community.



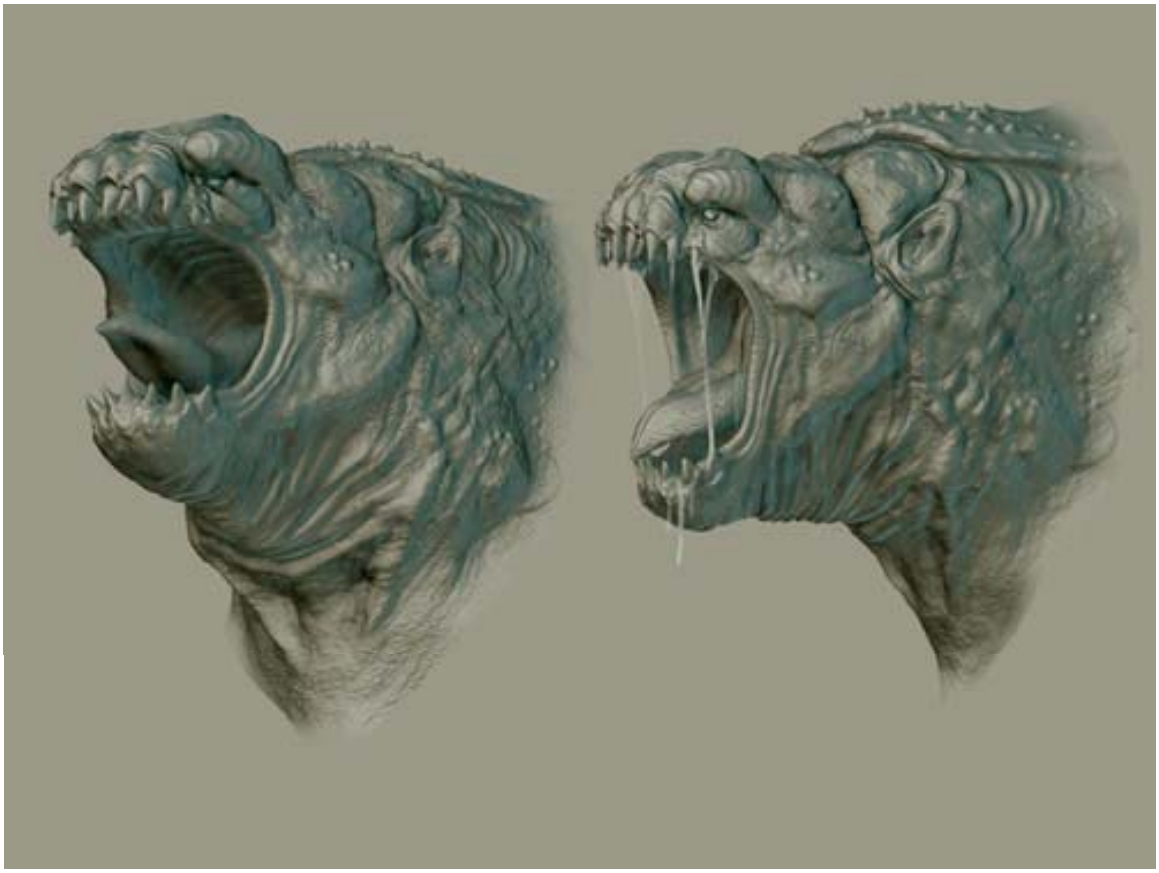
Using this application, I found that I was often disoriented when tumbling/rotating around the model. There was no reference to my to my position or orientation. Often bringing me to pull myself out, getting my berrings then going back in. Although you can hide/unhide sections of the mesh very quickly, I felt that navigating the canvas should be more like other 3D programs.

Some things that users may find distracting is the limited document size of 4096x4096. Those seeking higher renders will have to export the geometry to another package.

On the subject of exporting, there's only two options: DXF and OBJ. And, they are your only formats for export. Although these formats are widely used, they vary slightly from package to package.



Finally, you should not expect to do too much animation. What is there is limited. But in fairness, Zbrush isn't an animation package. I am sure this is there for users who have no access to animation alternatives. Z Brush is a winner. New users will experience one of the most thought out organic modeling applications on the market. Users looking to upgrade will be pleased at the huge amount of added features and the number of improvements in this version. No matter the industry you are in: game, movies, special effects and even the hobbyist there is something for you. Although I had problems with moving around the model, it's nothing that truly held me back from creating. And the multi-resolution mesh editing/sculpting is what's going to keep me using it for a long time.



Pixologic has taken concepts of 3D, infused it with the feeling of sculpting and created an arsenal of tools that set it above and beyond. This new arsenal does not alienate nor confuse the new user with gimmicks or work-around's, instead, gives a user a more welcome environment to make astounding work with something that feels more natural.

Last, the things Zbrush faults at are very minor and should not deter any user. It's a sweet modeler, and should be given a chance. You can find the demo (v1.55b) at http://www.pixologic.com.

Pros/Cons

Pros
-A lot of online documentation and step by step tutorials
-A workflow that doesn't try to wedge itself from applications an artist might already have, instead it adds, all the while very strong to stand on it's own.
-Very supportive community

-Z Spheres will change how artist model once they experience them.
-Tablet Support.

Cons
There isn't much of an animation system.
Only two formats for importing/exporting (Obj and DXF)
Small document size
Navigation takes getting used to

Z Brush 2.0 $489
Windows/Mac