

Review: Autodesk's 3-D technology cool but frustrating

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Last week, Autodesk updated its suite of 3-D printing and modeling applications, releasing an iPad version of 123D Catch, a program that creates a virtual object by stitching together two-dimensional photographs taken of a real-world one.

Autodesk's 123D suite was designed to allow [consumers](#) to be able to create, edit and print virtual objects quickly, easily and cheaply. I decided to test out the new app and portions of the suite to see how close the company's vision of consumer-friendly 3-D printing is to reality.

My conclusion was that while the new app is awesome, the suite remains very much a work-in-progress that is likely to greatly frustrate the average user.

[Autodesk](#) introduced 123D Catch last fall, originally as a Windows program. It uploads users' pictures of particular objects to Autodesk's servers, which use their immense [processing power](#) to assemble those pictures together into a seamless [three-dimensional image](#).

In its original incarnation, 123D Catch required several steps. Users had to take pictures of an object with their camera, upload them to their computer and then import them into the program before they could even start the process of creating a [virtual object](#) from them.

The new [iPad](#) app makes that process much simpler. Using an iPad that has a camera - sorry, you can't use the original iPad - you take pictures

inside the app. The app collects those pictures into what the program calls a "project," which you can then send to Autodesk to convert into a virtual object. There's no uploading to your computer or importing to a separate program needed.

Thanks to that streamlining, the whole process can take as little as 10 minutes, from start to finish.

And the results are amazing. I took pictures indoors and out of objects including a hat, a garden gnome and a little statue of former football star Terrell Davis. The virtual objects created from those pictures were lifelike, detailed, seamless and mostly complete (there were the occasional holes where I either missed a spot in photographing or the program couldn't put the images together).

123D Catch is worth a download if only for the sheer coolness of it, the ability to quickly and easily turn photographs of an object into a 3-D virtual image.

That said, the program has some significant limitations. It's available only on the iPad, which is unfortunate, because more people own smartphones than iPads and smartphones are much more popular for taking photographs. Autodesk officials said they are considering making an iPhone version, but declined to say when it might arrive.

But the program and its related suite have bigger problems related to the fact that the iPad app doesn't provide any direct way of editing or printing out a virtual object. So, if you want to turn your Catch-created virtual object into an actual one, you'll have to head to your PC.

Objects created in Catch are saved in an account you create on Autodesk's website. Ideally, you can take an object you've created and quickly print a version of it through the website. But I found the process

anything but simple.

You can't actually view the virtual objects you've created in Catch from inside your personal account on Autodesk's site. Instead, you can just see icons for your projects and the two-dimensional pictures you've uploaded.

In order to view and work with your [virtual objects](#) on the site, you have to share them in the company's public gallery. Not only does that raise privacy concerns, it's a step that isn't at all clear; I only figured it out by trial and error.

Once your object is in the gallery, you have options to print it in 3-D. Or at least you do if you have a relatively recent computer. The viewer that Autodesk uses to display 3-D objects in a browser requires a computer with a decent amount of horsepower; your computer, like mine, may not have enough.

But you probably don't want to print an unedited object created in Catch. The raw image file includes not just the object, but the surrounding environs, such as the floor it was sitting on or pieces of other nearby objects. To remove such things, you'll have to edit the image.

Since I was looking at Autodesk's suite, I tried using 123D, which connects to the company's website and allows you to download projects from it.

Unfortunately, that's about the only thing that's intuitive or easy about 123D. The program is only available as a separate Windows application, so you can't run it in a Web browser or on an iPad or Mac. What's worse is that its editing tools are bafflingly complex. I spent a couple hours with it, but couldn't figure out how to select a particular area of my object to edit, much less actually do so.

So after struggling with it a while, I basically abandoned the effort. There are other programs you can use to work with three-dimensional objects, and I may eventually try them. But it seems silly that it's so hard to complete the process using Autodesk's own suite. Here's hoping the company continues to refine it.

What: Autodesk 123D Catch for iPad and 123D suite of 3-D printing and modeling tools

Likes: Catch for iPad is easy to use and creates amazing 3-D images from everyday objects in a short amount of time; suite is free and allows users to take a project from conception to printed object.

Dislikes: Catch doesn't allow users to directly print or edit images; some applications in the suite are available for the iPad but not the PC, while some are available for the PC, but not for the iPad; 123D, used for creating and editing 3-D objects, is exceedingly difficult to learn and use.

Price: Apps and programs are free.

Web: 123dapp.com

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