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THE DIDACTIC POTENTIAL OF 3D MODELING TECHNOLOGIES IN SIMULATING PHYSICAL PHENOMENA

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to explore the didactic potential of three-dimensional (3D) modelling technologies when used in the simulation of physical phenomena within the teaching of physics. Traditional physics education frequently relies upon static representations – textbooks, chalk-board drawings, and two-dimensional diagrams – which often fail to adequately convey the dynamic, spatial and multi-variable nature of many physics concepts. By contrast, 3D modelling and simulation environments offer students immersive, manipulable, interactive models of physical systems, enabling deeper conceptual understanding, stronger engagement, and improved problem-solving performance. Drawing on current research in science education and physics education technology, this article analyses the cognitive, motivational and procedural advantages of 3D modelling in physics instruction; identifies key design principles for effective implementation of 3D simulation laboratories; discusses challenges and limitations (such as technological infrastructure, teacher training and cognitive overload); and proposes a framework for integrating 3D-modelling-based simulation tasks into physics curricula – especially in the context of preparing students for olympiad-level problem solving. The study concludes that 3D modelling technologies have substantial didactic affordances that, when thoughtfully embedded in physics instruction, can transform how students visualise, experiment with and reason about physical phenomena.

Keywords. 3D modelling; physics education; simulation; visualisation; digital laboratory; conceptual understanding; interactive learning; STEM pedagogy.

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Introduction

In the realm of physics education, the representation of physical phenomena has long presented a didactic challenge. Many key concepts – such as electromagnetic fields, wave interference in three dimensions, rigid-body rotations, fluid vortices or quantum wave-packets – are inherently spatial, dynamic and multi-parameter, making them difficult to fully convey using traditional two-dimensional diagrams or verbal exposition alone. Moreover, conventional laboratory experiments, while invaluable, are often constrained by safety concerns, cost, equipment limitations and the difficulty of isolating variables for exploration. In this context, digital simulation environments and virtual laboratories have emerged as innovative pedagogical tools, offering students opportunities to engage with models of physical phenomena that can be manipulated, repeated and visualised from multiple perspectives. Within this broader shift, three-dimensional modelling technologies assume particular importance: by rendering simulatable phenomena in full spatial form with interactive control over parameters, they can bridge the gap between abstract theoretical description and concrete physical intuition. Recent systematic reviews have shown that the use of modelling in science education can significantly improve student understanding, especially in areas of abstraction and spatial thinking. Specifically, research in natural sciences indicates that dynamic 3D visualisations and animations raise students' intrinsic motivation and yield moderate to strong learning gains. Given these promising findings, it becomes pedagogically relevant to inquire more specifically into how 3D modelling technology can be deployed in physics instruction – particularly in the context of competition-oriented tasks (e.g., physics olympiads), where the ability to visualise, model and experiment with complex physical systems confers a competitive edge. The present article proceeds to delineate the didactic affordances of 3D modelling in physics simulation, outlines design and implementation considerations for a digital laboratory environment, discusses obstacles and limitations, and offers a practical integration framework for physics teachers seeking to leverage 3D simulation in their instruction.

At its core, the didactic potential of 3D modelling in physics instruction can be conceptualised along three inter-related dimensions: cognitive, motivational and procedural. **Cognitive** gains arise because 3D visualisation helps reduce

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cognitive load associated with imagining spatial relationships, tracing dynamic interactions and mentally rotating coordinate frames. For example, rather than imagining a rotating rigid body and its instantaneous axis of rotation, students can directly observe a 3D model, rotate the view, change parameters and observe results in real time. Research shows that students exposed to 3D models and animations demonstrated significantly higher intrinsic motivation, interest and perceived usefulness of the subject matter, and in many cases achieved higher knowledge post-tests compared to control groups using conventional static visualisation. In the physics context, this means that complex phenomena – such as the superposition of waves in three dimensions, the behaviour of electromagnetic field lines around conductors, fluid flows around obstacles or motion in non-inertial frames – become more accessible. **Motivationally**, the interactive and immersive character of 3D modelling fosters engagement, curiosity and a willingness to experiment. Students are more likely to explore parameter space, test 'what-if' scenarios, and persist in tackling non-routine problems – a particularly desirable attitude in physics olympiad preparation. Finally, on the **procedural** dimension, 3D simulation environments act as proxies for real laboratories: they permit repeated experimentation, rapid parameter variation, safe exploration of extreme or hypothetical conditions, and immediate visual feedback. This supports iterative hypothesis-testing cycles and reinforces scientific thinking. To exploit these affordances effectively, a set of design principles for 3D modelling-based physics simulation tasks should be observed. First, fidelity matters: the model must capture essential features of the phenomenon without overwhelming extraneous detail. Overly realistic but cluttered simulation may distract rather than illuminate. Second, interactivity is key: students should be able to vary parameters, control viewpoint, pause or rewind time-evolution, and track multiple variables (e.g., force vectors, energy graphs, trajectories). Third, scaffolding must accompany the tool: embedded prompts, guiding questions or tiered tasks help students avoid aimless exploration and guide them toward meaningful reflection. Fourth, alignment to curricular objectives is essential: the simulation tasks must support the targeted physics conceptual or problem-solving goals, such as understanding torque and angular momentum, or visualising non-uniform fluid flow, rather than being mere digital

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'toys'. Fifth, integration with assessment and metacognitive reflection amplifies learning: students should be asked to predict outcomes, compare with simulation, reflect on discrepancies and refine their mental model. In practical terms, a teacher intending to implement 3D modelling simulation might structure sessions as follows: introduce the phenomenon and pose a challenge (for example: "What happens to the magnetic field of a loop when you change current and radius?"), allow students to manipulate a 3D simulation of the loop, change current and radius, observe field lines, track quantitative data and record outcomes, then engage them in analysis and problem-posing ("If you now tilt the loop, what happens to the induced emf when the field changes?"). In a competition context the teacher might present an olympiad-style problem (e.g., a conducting loop rotating in a non-uniform magnetic field) and ask students to use the simulation to test hypotheses, refine parameter ranges and formulate a solution strategy. Nonetheless, despite the clear didactic benefits, the integration of 3D modelling technologies into physics education is not without obstacles. Technological infrastructure remains a concern in many schools: adequate hardware (graphic-capable computers, appropriate monitors or VR/AR headsets), software licences (unless free/open-source), and reliable connectivity may pose barriers. Teacher training and pedagogical design are equally critical: the novel tools require teachers to redesign tasks, facilitate rather than lecture, monitor student activity in virtual space and assist metacognitive reflection. A further challenge is cognitive overload: immersive 3D simulation may introduce extraneous load or distract from core physics reasoning if not carefully scaffolded. Research also indicates that motivational gains may be strongest at younger ages (e.g., 11–13) and may diminish over time if novelty wears off. Moreover, a concern arises regarding the authenticity of virtual experiments: students may disregard measurement error, instrument limitations or real-world uncertainty, thus developing an idealised view of physics that does not align with physical laboratory realities.

Finally, the development of rich 3D simulation tasks aligned to olympiad-level problem solving demands considerable time and expertise. In light of these considerations, a practical framework for integrating 3D modelling simulation into physics curricula is proposed:

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Scoping: identify key physical phenomena in the curriculum where spatial/dynamic complexity hinders student comprehension (e.g., electromagnetism, rotational dynamics, fluid vortices, quantum wavepackets).
Tool selection: choose or develop 3D simulation software that allows parameter variation, viewpoint control, data output and ideally supports export of results. Preference should be given to open-source or freely licensed tools when possible.
Task design: craft simulation-based tasks, including initial exploratory activities, guided challenge tasks and extension olympiad-style problems. Include scaffolding prompts, prediction tasks, reflection questions and peer-discussion phases.
Implementation: run the simulation sessions, monitor student interactions, facilitate hypothesis generation and reflection, encourage parameter exploration and peer discussion.
Assessment and reflection: use pre/post tests of conceptual understanding, collect student feedback on motivation and engagement, ask students to document their simulation trials, parameter changes, hypotheses, results and reasoning.
Iteration: review outcomes, refine tasks, adjust scaffoldings, address technical and pedagogic barriers.
When applied consistently, this approach supports progressive development of student competence in visualising and reasoning about complex physical systems, better prepares them for olympiad-level challenge tasks, and cultivates transferable scientific modelling skills. In conclusion, the use of 3D modelling technologies in physics simulation presents a compelling didactic opportunity. By rendering the invisible visible, enabling interactive exploration, and bridging the gap between abstract theory and tangible phenomena, these technologies enhance conceptual understanding, strengthen student engagement and support higher-order problem-solving. Nevertheless, their effectiveness depends on thoughtful task design, adequate infrastructure and teacher professional development. As physics instruction evolves in an increasingly digital era, the integration of 3D simulation laboratories represents a strategic step toward enriching physics education and better preparing students for complex, multivariable reasoning required in contemporary STEM challenges.

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