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Are game engines used for serious physics simulations?

I agree with Victor "depends on what you mean by serious physics". You have to select the right tool based on your requirements (prioritized). For example do you need real time simulation? joints simulation? etc. And make a decision based on all the trade offs.

My company set out to build self-walking bipedal real time simulation 2 years ago and evaluated several options including PhysX and Bullet. None of them can support our needs. So we have to build the articulated physics engine in order to achieve our goals. Now the self-walking bipedal and quadruped character simulation package (which includes the articulated physics engine) DeepMotion Avatar is available for alpha users.

Here is a list of videos on youtube channel showing several examples of what you can build with this physics engine. DeepMotion