

MG Interview: Mark Adams

by Tuncer Deniz

Mark Adams is on a roll. After doing some popular ports like Chuck Yeager's Air Combat and PGA Tour II, Adams is currently finishing up the conversion of Links (the best-selling golf game on the PC) for the Mac which promises to be a smash hit. There's no doubt that Mark Adams, who is just 27 years old, is the hottest and most sought after independent game programmer in the Macintosh game market today.

IMG: Can you give us a little background of yourself? What are your origins as a programmer?

Adams: I started playing games in Junior High, when I got an Apple II+. At first I just played games and wrote some BASIC programs, but then I began to hack around with assembly language, at first just wandering through commercial game's code and making changes here and there to see what would happen. I started trying to write real games after a couple years but nothing ever got to a finished stage (its a lot easier to start a game than to finish it!).

Then in 1984 Apple released the first Mac. I had seen the Lisa before and thought it was incredibly cool, and instantly wanted a Mac. I bought a 128k Mac in May of '84 but there weren't any tools to write anything on it for a year or two, so I just used it for games and writing papers for school. By then I had decided I wanted to be programmer, so I went to the University of Texas at Austin to get a Computer Science degree. I had already learned a few programming languages (BASIC, Pascal, 6502 assembly) on my own, but it was good to see the other side of programming, from an academic perspective.

After I got my CS degree in '88, I looked for a job for a couple months with out much luck. Finally I saw an ad for a company that wanted someone to do a game conversion from the Apple II to the PC and Mac. The game turned out to be Space Rogue, for Origin Systems, and I was hired on to do the PC, Mac, and Amiga versions (the Mac one was by far the best!). After I did Space Rogue, the company I had hired on with, Technology Works, stopped doing outside software contracts, and began doing their own products (unfortunately not games). I spent a few years writing network management and productivity software. Finally in late 1992 I decided to go out on my own and do games again. I hooked up with LookingGlass

Technologies (the original designers of Space Rogue) and did Chuck Yeager's Air Combat for the Mac. Since then I've also done PGA TOUR Golf II and Links Pro.

IMG: What was your first computer game?

Adams: The first game I wrote was an adventure game in BASIC on the Apple II, but it was never quite finished and never released. The first commercial game I did was Space Rogue for the PC & Mac.

IMG: You also did Iraq Attack, a popular shareware game in its time. Why did you decide to release a shareware game?

Adams: I had the idea for Iraq Attack watching CNN coverage of the air attacks before the Gulf War. I was bored because I hadn't written any games for a while at my real job, and so I wrote up the game in a couple weeks and decided to release it shareware so a lot of people could play it.

IMG: Did anyone pay their shareware fee <grin>?

Adams: Shareware is a tough business, I got a couple dozen fees, which was OK since I didn't do it to make money. I actually have received quite a few registrations for some other shareware utilities I wrote, like AppDisk (a ramdisk program).

IMG: Will you be doing anymore shareware games in the future?

Adams: I don't have any plans to do any more, but if I'm between projects and looking for something to play with I might write another. It is nice to do smaller scale project that you don't have to worry about missing a bug that is going to be duped onto 10,000 disks the next week.

IMG: OK, here's a tough one, are Mac users snobs? Complainers?

Adams: Mac users certainly do have a higher expectations for their games, in terms of graphics and interface. In some cases this is good, but in others it can really discourage a PC developer that honestly puts a lot of work into a Mac game and then gets slammed by a bunch of Mac users about some mistakes in interface or a few pieces of lower resolution artwork. One thing that does bother me about Mac users is an attitude many have that anything coming from the DOS world is inherently bad. A port actually has to have a better interface and art than an original Mac game, because people know it came from DOS and are looking for any slight thing that doesn't look right.

IMG: You seem to be doing really well with ports of PC games, do you foresee doing any of your own original titles in the future?

Adams: I'm having a good time with the PC conversions right now, and I think I do a good job on them. Its nice to be able to start with a game you already know is very popular (like Links386) and then add your own ideas to it for interface and Mac features like network play. I would like to do original games sometime in the future, but its hard to turn down an offer to do a really big PC hit on the Mac. I plan on doing a original work after my next project or two, but if someone came to me and asked if I wanted to do XWing or Doom or some other mega-hit on the PC I'd definitely think about it.

IMG: Of the 3 ports you've done recently, which one did you like the most? Which one are

you most proud of?

Adams: Links Pro is probably my favorite, just because it has such great replayability. Normally when I finish a game I've played it constantly for about 3-4 months, and really get tired of it. But I still play Links, and get into some pretty heated ARA net matches with my friends.

IMG: Are you much of a golfer?

Adams: I played a few times before I did PGA 2 and Links, and followed it on TV some, but I have gained more interest since working on golf games for the past 9 months. I bought a set of clubs (I can even deduct them as a business expense, for research!) and usually play once or twice a month.

IMG: How long did Links take to port over to the Mac?

Adams: Links took about 6 months, which was pretty quick considering it was written in 100% 80x86 assembly language on the PC. Every line of the game had to be re-written on the Mac into C, 68000 assembly, or PowerPC code. One of the things I'm most proud of on Links was that it was finished only 2 weeks off of the original schedule we set back in December.

IMG: By the time people read this, Links will be on the shelves. About how often will we be seeing extra golf courses for Links Mac?

Adams: There should be one or two courses available as add-ons when Links Mac hits the shelf, and other courses will be released every 6 weeks or so. I don't have much knowledge of the marketing side of the game, but from what I understand Access plans to release all of the existing Links high-res courses for the Mac over the coming months, as well as releasing newly designed courses more or less at the same time for the PC and Mac.

IMG: What would be the "perfect" computer game?

Adams: There are a couple games I've played that come close to being "perfect", one was Civilization from Microprose, and the other was the original Wizardry for the Apple II. I don't think you can say exactly what would make a game perfect, but there are games that just have a "feel" to them that causes you to lose a sense of time when you are playing them and you become completely immersed in the game. As complex as games have become these days there will always be minor bugs and problems, but if you do the right job behind the scenes the graphics should draw you into the game play, and the game should be balanced so you don't just blaze through it quickly or get frustrated early on by lack of progress.

IMG: So, do you think X-Wing can be done on the Mac?

Adams: From my experience any PC game can be done on the Mac, usually with comparable speed & game play. How hard it would be is tough say. 3D games usually port well, but games with lots of cinematic sequences can be hard because there is so much artwork in lower resolution that you've got to at least make partially hi-res on the Mac. Code-wise, you can write equivalent C or assembly language on the Mac for anything on the PC, so while it might not be easy anything should be doable.

IMG: What's your take on the Mac games market? What are your impressions of the Mac

games market today?

Adams: The Mac games market is growing, and there are more companies taking notice of it. I have had numerous PC companies contact me about doing Mac versions of their games, so I think the number of low end color Macs Apple has been selling to home users over the past couple of years has really helped. I think PC and Mac games will start to look more similar in the near future, since the PC is finally shifting to higher resolution SuperVGA games (the way the Mac has been all along). This will get rid of the biggest problem in taking games from the PC to Mac or Mac to PC, the artwork. A game like Links386 that already had great looking hi-res art on the PC can go over to the Mac and look incredible, without having artists go in and retouch all the art.

IMG: What is your feeling on copy protection?

Adams: I'd leave out copy protection from all my games if I had the choice (its the publisher's decision). Links Pro isn't copy protected and I think its a great decision on Access' part. You aren't going to stop hard-core pirates with protection, and it really just annoys the end user. The one-time copy protection question when you first install is the least annoying form I've found, if you do have to copy protect your game.

IMG: What do you think is the future of computer entertainment? Virtual reality?

Adams: Virtual reality is such a buzzword these days, I'm not sure what it really means to gamers. The machines will definitely get faster and have better sound & graphics. I wouldn't be surprised to see the VR style 3D games like Pathways or Doom become a major part of the market over the next few years, and eventually someone will make a \$200 VR helmet that has a couple of good color LCD screens and head tracking hardware. The more esoteric ideas of virtual reality seem a ways off, but I could see some really great 3D games (flight sims, role playing, sports) that would work well with or without a helmet coming out in the next couple of years.

IMG: Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years? Still programming great Mac games?

Adams: I hope I'll still be doing games, either for the Mac or whatever has replaced it. I've always thought there was something special about the computers Apple makes, and even though they've lost some of their mystique over the last few years I'd still rather do games for Macs than anything other system.

IMG: Is the Macintosh dead? Is PowerPC the savior?

Adams: I think the Mac in some form will be around for a long time. The PowerPC really is a shot in the arm, especially for games. A lot of the state of the art games are either going to be written on the PowerMacs or look best on the PowerMacs over the next few years. There is just so much horsepower there, and games are always the first programs to push the limits.

IMG: What types of games do you see foresee being developed for the PowerPC?

Adams: 3D games are probably best suited for it, with lots of texture mapped polygons and shading. I wouldn't be surprised to see a small resurgence of 2D arcade games, partly from nostalgia and partly because the PowerPC also is very fast at moving pixels around for scrolling and other 2D effects.

IMG: OK, quick, what the heck is texture mapping?

Adams: Texture mapping is just a different way to color in polygons you draw in a 3D game. Instead of having a wall or the wing of a plane be a solid color, you take a texture (like bricks or wood grain) and stick it to the polygon surface like you'd put decals on a model plane. This gives you a lot of detail without the game having to actually render individual bricks or pieces of wood.

IMG: If I wanted to learn how to program, what advice would you give me?

Adams: Get some books aimed at beginners and try to work through them. If you know a little programming but want to start writing games or other software the best advice I can give is to just take an idea and start writing it. Start with something simple and add extra bits to it as you go. Even if you can't finish a game completely or get stuck somewhere, you'll learn best from writing something once and then seeing what problems come up.

IMG: Do you have any personal favorite games, Macintosh or otherwise?

Adams: I like all kinds of games, some of my favorites go back to the Apple II - Wizardry and Choplifter. Others from the Mac & PC - Civilization, Links Pro, Simcity, Lemmings, Ultima Underworld, Prince of Persia. I'm also addicted to NBA Jam in the arcade.

IMG: What do you do for fun?

Adams: I play a lot of games, and am a big pro & college sports fan (my favorite teams are the Atlanta Braves, Chicago Bulls, and Texas Longhorns). I hang out online on AOL and eWorld, and play golf (for real when I can or on the Mac when I can't).

IMG: What are you planning next?

Adams: I'll be doing another conversion from the PC to the Mac, although I'm not sure what game it will be yet. I'm talking to a couple companies that have some extremely popular games on the PC, and also with a smaller company that has a revolutionary game that will be out this Fall for the PC.