

Links Pro has plenty to offer Mac golfers: beautiful graphics and an excellent range of controls – including options that enable you to change the colour of your shirt and the way you address the ball [Dear sir? – Ed]. But can it beat *PGA Tour Golf*?

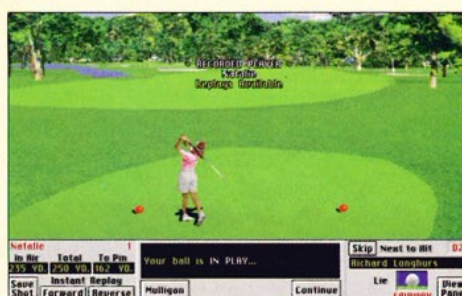
Links Pro

It's a beautiful day for a game of golf, the sky is clear, the sun is shining, the birds are singing and there's a party going on at the 19th hole. Richard Longhurst gets into the swing of things.

A GLORIOUS BOUNDING DRIVE...



1 With *Links Pro* you can set up the screen to suit your playing style. The top-down view is very useful when you are planning your strategy for that hole.



2 Golf's a wonderfully sexist game in which the ladies sometimes get to start 150 yards in front of the men, which is why Natalie's out-driven me by a mile.



3 You can position a marker to judge distances on your shot. On this par 5, the green's too far away to reach in two, so an easy two-iron lay-up is the shot to go for.

Electronic Arts' *PGA Tour Golf* has ruled the roost for far too long. The Mac's most popular golf game hasn't had too much to worry about in terms of rivals, but all that is set to change now US Gold's *Links Pro* has swaggered arrogantly on to the tee, sporting its favourite multi-coloured sweater and a natty pair of slacks.

Links Pro is the Rolls Royce of golf games, offering more golfing gameplay subtleties than you can wave Sam Torrance's stupidly long putter at. The first thing you need to do is create a virtual golfer in your own image. You begin by typing in your name (I had to play as 'Richard Longhurst' because the program – rather pathetically – only accepts names of up to 16 characters). You then select either male or female animation, choose your ability (which affects how forgiving the game is when you make a mistake), and pick a tee (there are four distances to choose from). Last, and most importantly, you choose your player's shirt colour (there are no patterns, I'm afraid). You can also choose to have an automatic electronic caddy so you don't have the hassle of selecting your own club for each shot.

And then it's out on to the first tee to get to grips with the control system. A huge status bar across the bottom of the screen gives you every conceivable piece of information about your shot – but, at first, all you're interested in is how to hit the ball. Press and hold down the mouse button to start the stroke, release the button at the top of the backswing, and then click it the moment the clubhead strikes the ball. It's simple enough once you get the hang of it, but is always rather fiddly when you're playing short chip shots.

Once you've mastered the basics, it's on to more advanced matters, such as changing the shape of your shot to steer the ball around trees or under branches. Several pre-defined stances are available for straight shots, fades (where the ball moves from left to right in the air), draws (where the ball moves from right to left), chips and putts. Alternatively, you can take total control over your stance. Even weekend golfers can appreciate the importance of being able to open or close your stance, move the ball forwards or backwards, and open or close the face of the clubhead, but *Links Pro* is the only golf game on the market that actually gives you this degree of control. It's only when you get hugely serious about the game that you'll begin

FOR PURE SELF-SATISFACTION...



Although it looks pretty, the reverse-angle action replay doesn't really serve any useful purpose at all...



... Apart from when you want to admire your excellent approach shots. Easy, these par 3s, aren't they?

to use the setup option, but at least it's there when you do need it.

As well as all this Faldo-esque attention to detail, *Links Pro* also features some of the most realistic graphics ever seen in a computer game. Visually, comparing US Gold's title with Electronic Arts' ageing effort is like putting Barry McGuigan in the same ring as Lennox Lewis: absolutely no contest. *Links Pro* is simply the best-looking sports game around, which is remarkable considering it only takes up around 4Mb of disk space.

To create the stunning visuals, the game's designers scurried over famous golf courses (at least, they're famous in the US), and took thousands of photographs from every conceivable angle. After some technical trickery, the pictures find their way on to your Mac's screen, looking as fresh and as detailed as the day they were taken. Hell, *Links Pro* looks so good that you can almost taste the 19th hole's G 'n' T as you stroll up the fairway of the 18th.

The downside of all this detail is the length of time the game spends drawing the scene for each shot. The view is gradually constructed with objects in the distance being overlaid by objects in the foreground, which means the program spends time drawing buildings that eventually get completely obscured by trees. The re-draw time isn't a problem on a Power-Mac (*Links Pro* automatically switches its code to native mode), but you'll be impatiently drumming your fingers on anything less than a Quadra. You can make things slightly faster by adjusting the display settings to make the program draw less background detail, but it's not

an entirely satisfactory solution.

Apart from its lack of speed on less powerful Macs, *Links Pro* has two other major problems. One is the absence of a tournament mode. The great thing about *PGA Tour Golf* is that you get the chance to pit your wits against the greats of American golf, but in *Links Pro* you can only participate in match-play games against human or computer opponents. A neat little touch is the way it enables you to record your round so you can play against yourself at a later date, or send it to a *Links*-owning friend so he or she can try to match your score. The option to play with up to seven other golfers over a network is welcome, but neither this nor the round-recording feature can replace the tension and excitement of strokeplay tournament golf.

The other problem is the courses that come with the program – or, more to the point, the lack of them. Harbour Town is the only course that features in the game, and even though it offers quite a decent range of holes with a smattering of sand and water, it's not long before you want a bit of variety – that is, to be able to play somewhere else. Naturally, there are more courses available, but they'll cost you a not-inconsiderable £25.99 each.

Had *Links Pro* featured a tournament mode and offered slightly better value for money, it would have happily cruised to a score in the 90s, but, as it is, it's only a near-perfect game. Having said all that though, *Links Pro* really is an immensely enjoyable game to play and absolutely beautiful to look at, and, what's more, you don't have to be a dedicated golfing fanatic to enjoy it.

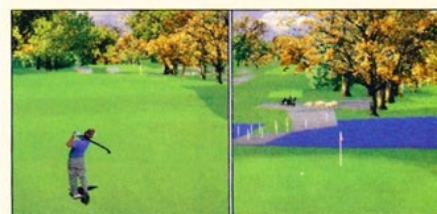
Richard Longhurst

READY, AIM, FIRESTONE

Most golf games come with more than one course, but not *Links Pro* – you have to pay for the extras. The first of many add-on disks is *Firestone Country Club*, but at £25.99 it's a little pricey.



Trees, trees and more trees are on offer at Firestone. You need a straight and steady drive to avoid them.



But even if you manage to hit the fairway, you're often left with an interesting shot to the green. Trees, trees, more trees and water... (You'll need a lot of luck here.)

LINKS PRO

Price: £45.99. Out: now.

Requires: LC or better (not PowerBook), System 6.07 or later, 4Mb of RAM (8Mb recommended), 256 colours, 13-inch monitor and 4Mb of hard disk space. For more details contact US Gold on 021 625 3388.

Graphics

You don't get images this good on the TV.

93%

Sound

Good speech and digital effects.

85%

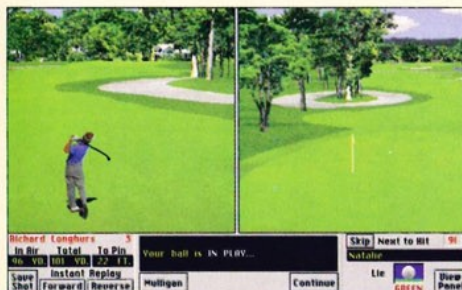
Gameplay

If only there was a tournament...

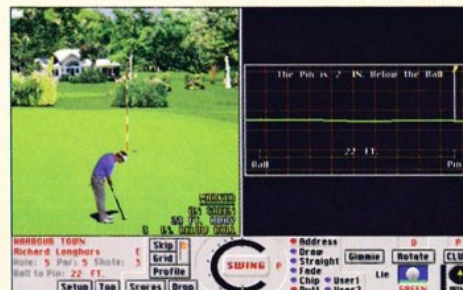
81%

MACFORMAT RATING

88%



4 The split-screen mode with the reverse view from the green is ideal for admiring your delicate approach shots. This one's got to be worth a decent round of applause.



5 Putting's one of the trickiest parts of *Links Pro*, which might sound like a feeble excuse for why I'm going to miss this birdie putt, but it's true.



6 And so to the tap-in. Natalie's made her birdie and I've spent far too long fiddling about with the screen modes to pay any proper attention to the game.