What if you lived in a world where the headlines in those sleazy supermarket tabloids could be believed? What if you were a reporter for such a sensationalist rag? That is the situation in Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders. Meeting Elvis, alive, in the jungle is a nice touch and having two-headed squirrels, golf-worshipping gurus and other assorted oddities of nature cross your path with terrifying regularity allows the crazy tone of the tabloids to come through. The game's atmosphere is suitably light and the puzzles are never so difficult or so deadly as to impede your enjoyment of the story.

The Play's The Thing

It hardly seems worthwhile to discuss Zak's control system at length. Suffice it to say that it is not significantly different from Maniac Mansion's, which is just fine. You move characters on a graphic window by selecting text commands from a menu at the bottom of the screen. If you want to know more, pick up a copy of CGW #46. The controls are still a little clumsy in moments of high tension, but the system is a good one.

The story is worth noting, but only briefly: Zak McKracken, a reporter for a tabloid newspaper (a clever parody called The National Inquisitor is stuffed with hints and is included with the game), has a nightmare (also clever, a Pink Panther-style bit of opening animation that may be the best part of the game) which compels him to go on a quest.

What he doesn't immediately know is that a bunch of aliens have a machine which makes people stupid operating by means of the world's phone lines. Along the way, Zak picks up three helpers (the player can switch control to any of the four characters at any time). Together, they must save the world from having its mind bent.

That's it for the story, which is another problem. After setting up a perfectly good premise, the game drops all pretense to plot and becomes yet another "find-the-pieces-scattered-around-the-world-to-build-a-magic-machine" game. Worst of all, the pieces you have to find are different colored crystals, a plot device that was a cliche when Starycross (Infocom) used it. More recently The Promethean Prophecy (Simon & Schuster) used the same old motif. If I never see another collect-the-crystals adventure, it will be too soon.

When I mentioned this to David Fox, he said he hadn't realized that collecting crystals had been done before. Presumably, he also hadn't realized that arbitrary puzzles are no longer considered optimal or even, acceptable. Back in the days of Wizard and the Princess, we accepted the idea that saying "Hocus" would make a bridge appear over a gorge, even though the same magic word had no such effect elsewhere. Today we demand puzzles that make sense. Most of the time Zak delivers—but the designers have only so much imagination, and over the course of the game, it gets stretched mighty thin.

This leaves far too many non-puzzles. For example, you need to open a door, so you use a yellow crayon to connect the dots you see on the wall. Why? There are three buttons on a door on Mars and you must press the buttons in the order that three witch doctors danced in Africa in order to open the door. Why? There are too
many convenient coincidences, too many situations in
which the solution is drawing some mystic symbol on the
wall. David Fox justifies this by saying that there's a hint
about drawing on the wall in *The Inquisitor*. That doesn't
mean, however, that this sort of puzzle makes good inter-
active fiction.

**Most Infinite Jest**

"Brevity," Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet," is the soul of
wit." This is advice many would do well to take to heart.
Comedy that gets dragged out too long is like a magic
trick performed too slowly. You see the wires; you figure
out the effect; and still it goes on, painfully and inter-
minably. If a joke is right on target, though, it can go on
forever. You want it to. If a joke misses, however, it is best
to get it offstage quickly.

How does this apply to *Zak McKracken and the Alien
Mindbenders*? For one thing, the game is being sold as
being much longer than its predecessor, *Maniac Man-
sion*. *Zak* is longer, no question about it, but *Maniac
Mansion* is plenty long itself. Is the extra poundage an im-
provement? Unfortunately, the whole game tends to be
huge and cumbersome, and not funny or sophisticated
enough to justify its size. Juggling ten balls is not always
funnier than juggling three. That is not to say that *Zak*
is not a good game. It has moments of brilliance (though
fewer than the generally brilliant *Maniac Mansion*) con-
ected by passages of good, if unspectacular, material. It
is technically superb, with fluid animation, extensive use
of sound effects, and a comfortable control system. It
even has a few puzzles that are absolutely perfect. It is fun
to play, and, even at its worst, it is entertaining. On the
whole, it's a nice little diversion.

What it is not is a great game. The tragedy is that, after
*Maniac Mansion*, it should have been.

There are plenty of little problems which can be men-
tioned later, but the game's central flaw must be dis-
cussed right away.

Designer David Fox told me that the public's response to
*Maniac Mansion* was appreciation mixed with
claustrophobia. Players felt stifled by the mansion's walls
and wanted to be free to move around in an open en-
vironment. Always happy to oblige, Fox wrote the latest
game in such a way as to allow players to travel from San
Francisco to London to Miami to Mexico to the Bermuda
Triangle to Mars to Parts Unknown . . .

So far so good, but here's the rub, no matter how big
*Zak* is, there is only so much space on two sides of two
disks. In the previous game, players got to explore that
house until they were blue in the face. When they were
done, they knew every crevice. It felt like a house (and a
big house at that). The simulation was rich and the en-
vironment was fully realized. When players couldn't go in
a direction, it was because a wall prevented them. When
an object couldn't be used, it was because that object
had no function.

In this new effort, necessity limits San Francisco to a
half dozen screens. Why can't characters go down the
block past the bakery? It is impossible because there was
not space on the disk to program in the rest of the city.

The result is a simulation that feels flat, like a movie
town made of propped-up facades or a State tour in Rus-
sia. You can only go where the story wants you to go,
and it won't let you forget it.

Now, don't tell me this is what you wanted when you
said that *Maniac Mansion* made you feel closed in. At
least, that game's limitations made sense. Here, you feel
like a rat being funnelled through a maze of invisible
walls, a puppet in the hands of an arbitrary designer.
Believe me, in *Maniac Mansion* you were free. In *Zak Mc-
Kracken and the Alien Mindbenders*, the illusion of
freedom is as transparent as a sheet of glass.

Personally, I would rather have had a hundred screens
of San Francisco than six each of Mars, Nepal, Cairo and
so forth, especially when there is no reason for the
globetrotting other than showcasing a variety of back-
ground graphics.

What it comes down to is that there is so much more
space covered that it is covered less well. As a result, the
game feels artificial, a problem which it never overcomes.

**A Countenance More In Sorrow Than In Anger**

One could harp on other shortcomings, a dozen
minor frustrations: you don't select your charac-
ters; the characters in the game aren't distinct from
each other; the story gets lost several times and is in-
adecately supported by "cut scenes," the promised
"cinematic touches" and "dramatic camera angles" are
mostly limited to straight-on, medium-
length shots (much as in
*Maniac Mansion*); and
the jungle and temple
"mazes" are pointless.
There is no intent to scare
you off. Nevertheless,
before you buy this
product, you should know
what you're getting. You
should buy it, nonetheless.

Those few perfect puzzles are worth the price of admis-
sion. For example, the airplane sequences come to mind,
as does building a spacesuit for Zak for when he gets to
Mars. Then, too, the humor doesn't always fall flat. The
game can be enjoyed and that's what counts.

If it is not too bold, one could ask that *Lucasfilm*
take this criticism to heart. No malice is intended. *Zak Mc-
Kracken and the Alien Mindbenders* is basically a good
game. It simply could have been better. Therefore, here is
my shopping list for the next *Lucasfilm* adventure game.
First, until you have unlimited space to work with, pick
one location and stick to it. Second, take your time. If
you don't have any good ideas for puzzles, wait until you
do. Third, go through your games and scrap everything
that's tedious and unimaginitive. Being aware of cliches
like the crystals could save consumers from disappoin-
tment. Fourth, get better music and more of it. What
would *Raiders of the Lost Ark* have been without that
fabulous John Williams' soundtrack? *Maniac Mansion*
was a hard act to follow, but I'll bet you can still design a
better one.