

# BIG ZAK ATTACK

## Lucasfilm's "Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders"

by Charles Ar dai

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.

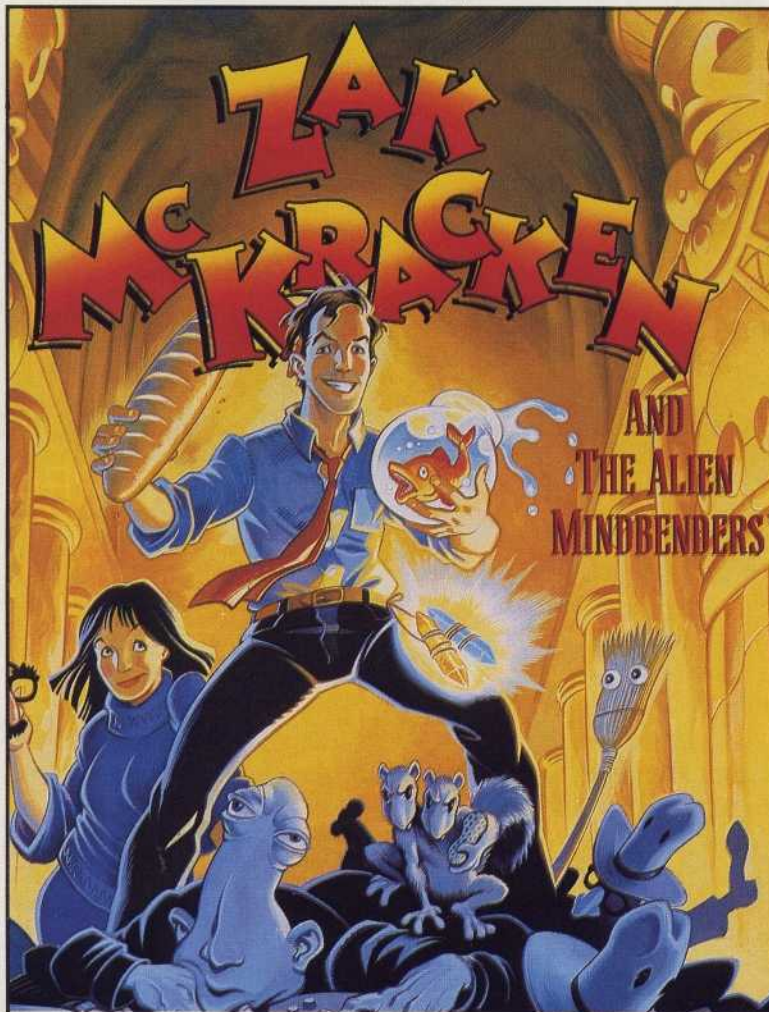
What he doesn't immediately know is that a bunch of aliens have a machine which makes people stupid operating by means of the world's phone lines. Along the way, Zak picks up three helpers (the player can switch control to any of the four characters at any time). Together, they must save the world from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



TITLE:	Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders
SYSTEM:	IBM, C-64
# PLAYERS:	1
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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 interactive 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 interminably. 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 Mansion*. *Zak* is longer, no question about it, but *Maniac Mansion* is plenty long itself. Is the extra poundage an improvement? 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*) connected 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 mentioned later, but the game's central flaw must be discussed 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 environment. 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 environment 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 Russia. 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 McKracken 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 background 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 characters; the characters in the game aren't distinct from each other; the story gets lost several times and is inadequately 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 admission. 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 McKracken 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 unimaginative. Being aware of cliches like the crystals could save consumers from disappointment. 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.

