

Zak McKracken And The Alien Mindbenders

Studio: **LucasArts**

Designer(s): **David Fox**

Part of series: —

Release: October 1988 (DOS) / 1990 (FM Towns)

Main credits: Programmers: **David Fox, Matthew Alan Kane**
 Graphic Art: **Gary Winnick, Martin Cameron**
 Music / Sound Effects: **Matthew Alan Kane**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (180 mins.)

Basic Overview

To paraphrase The Smiths, "some games are bigger than others, some games' fathers are bigger than other games' fathers". Although David Fox, a general computer and multimedia wiz who was one of the founding fathers of Lucasfilm's Game Division, was quite a key figure in the history of LucasArts' rise to prominence — it was he who designed and did most of the work on *Labyrinth*, the studio's first and, some might argue, the most innovative and revolutionary contribution to the art of the adventure game — the average gamer these days is much less probable to run into any mention of his name than those of Ron Gilbert, Dave Grossman, or Tim Schafer (even if, in recent years, he has actually made a comeback into that world and rejoined Gilbert and Grossman on such projects as *Thimbleweed Park* and *Return To Monkey Island*). This is not only due to Fox quitting the studio at an early stage, before it hit its major artistic stride in the early 1990s, but also to the fact that his second and last game for the studio, *Zak McKracken And The Alien Mindbenders*, failed to live up to the high expectations set by 1988's *Maniac Mansion* — or, at least, that's how it largely *seemed* to critics and customers at the time. It is a rather classic example of «the one that had to fall through the cracks» because *something* is always bound to fall through the cracks, no matter how unjust it might seem to those willing to lower themselves upon the floor and carefully re-extract it with nostalgic pincers.



Granted, in the immediate aftermath of the technical and stylistic breakthroughs introduced by *Maniac Mansion* it would be difficult to expect an equally warm reception to a sequel (well, technically it was a completely different story, but in spirit it might as well have been dubbed a sequel) that, upon first sight, merely repeated the formula of its predecessor, perhaps with a slightly expansive and more ambitious approach that could, for the average player, feel more frustrating than inspiring. Pretty soon, games like *Loom* and the *Indiana Jones* series would once again push that wagon forward, but *Zak McKracken*, if you ever decide to play all LucasArts games in chronological order, does give a bit of that «coasting» feeling — never a good thing in the age of true progress, which is precisely what it was for adventure games in the late Eighties.

And yet, in some ways *Zak McKracken* did significantly differ from its surroundings, even if this rather becomes clearer in retrospect. For one thing, of all the snarky tricksters and miscreants in LucasArts, David Fox seems to have been (along with Brian Moriarty of *Loom* fame) the most serious of the lot. Unlike Gilbert and Grossman, whose chief interests, so it seems, were in digital gaming from the very beginning, Fox was more of a general computer expert, having written books such as *Computer Animation Primer* and *Armchair BASIC*, and even opened (in 1977) what Wikipedia claims to have been «the world's first public-access microcomputer center». Later, after quitting LucasArts, he would go on to design educational software rather than straightforward computer games (that is, until he got back with his old pals from the studio decades later). And it is said that his original design for *Zak McKracken* was a game that took itself seriously — until Gilbert talked him out of the idea, for whatever reason (perhaps he simply did not believe that the time was right for the barely self-conscious art of video gaming to get serious, or was afraid that Fox would turn the studio into a clone of Sierra On-Line).

Even so, despite *Zak McKracken And The Alien Mindbenders* ultimately becoming yet another hilariously absurdist creation cast in the image of *Maniac Mansion*, the game still explored relatively serious topics; where *Maniac Mansion* was simply a straightforward goof-off (at best — a smart parody of family-oriented horror, sci-fi, and generic cartoons rolled in one), the main subject of *Zak McKracken* — that of the influence of tabloid tripe on public conscience — had a certain modicum of social relevance, not easy to properly assess unless you actually gave it some thought, but if you *did* give it some thought, you might even have made a case for *Zak McKracken* being a true «thinking man's game» at a time when even the most sophisticated adventure games were still essentially re-enactments of fairy tale clichés or straight-up parodies of pop culture. The problem is, back then people rarely evaluated games for their actual content; immersion, user-friendliness, the overall quality of the puzzles *and*, of course, improvements in graphics and sound were so much more the rage — and on all those counts, *Zak McKracken* did well enough to earn a passable grade from the critics, but not enough to earn their genuine admiration. In other words, the game's flaws were more easy to savor than its virtues.

Nevertheless, a small, but dedicated cult following did stabilize around the game, protecting it from going down in history as a disaster and even producing a couple of amateurish, indie-made sequels, for lack of an official one (understandably, after Fox left the studio, nobody ever cared about resurrecting Zak McKracken the same way the studio cared about resurrecting, say, Guybrush Threepwood). The typical retro-verdict that I see these days around the Web is along the lines of «well, it's a pretty hard game, but if you can get around its mercilessness to new players, it's a fun enough romp with some educational value to it». Which may be good enough for obsessed retro-gamers and absolutely condemning for everybody else — but even if you have never played *Zak McKracken* and never intend to play *Zak McKracken*, this does not necessarily mean you won't get anything out of *reading* about *Zak McKracken*. So here we go!

Content evaluation

Plotline

On the surface, the basic plot of *Zak McKracken* all but mirrors the story of *Maniac Mansion* — just like in that game, here we deal with a supernatural alien intrusion, the ultimate goal of which is to achieve world domination through indoctrination of the victims. However, in *Maniac Mansion* that aspect was not particularly well thought through, and the entire line of the Evil Meteor possessing Dr. Fred, the Mad Scientist, was merely a plot-serving goof without any implications. The game's story was just an (admittedly funny) parody on the battle of Absolute Good vs. Absolute Evil, and all that mattered about it were the isolated scattered jokes, gags, and (of course) puzzles.

Fox took his duties more seriously. First of all, as an early pioneer of «edutainment» software, he made sure that the game would be far more expansive than its predecessor. As a journalist working for *The National Inquisitor*, a tabloid of poor reputation but rich circulation, Zak McKracken will have to travel all over the world — from San Francisco to London, from Egypt to Mexico, from Kinshasa to Tibet; he will have a chance to get lost in The Bermuda Triangle and even grace the planet of Mars with his appearance. Although all of these locations are represented in facetious, «tabloid-style» mode, Fox had clearly done his research on everything associated with paranormal activity — the Pyramids of Egypt and Mexico, Stonehenge,



witch doctors, shamans, pretty much everything and everyone that has ever attracted the attention of sensation-seekers, and his tale unwinds in a fun world mixing cultural authenticity with tabloid fantasy. The influence of Broderbund's *Where In The World Is Carmen Sandiego?* is undeniable, though *Zak McKracken* is not really here to test your knowledge of geography: its chief focus is exploration of popular cultural mythology rather than historical trivia.

Second, the game's main plotline is, in a rather sly (and, for that period, *extremely* intelligent) manner, somewhat metaphorical of the general human condition. According to the story, the evil alien race of «Caponians», having taken over the intercommunication monopoly of «The Phone Company», are launching a plan to subjugate humanity by constantly transmitting a special «Mind Bending» signal, designed to lower the intelligence level of everybody subjected to it. It is up to Zak and his friends, freelancer Annie Larris (possibly named after David's spouse and work partner, Annie Fox) and two Yale students, Melissa and Leslie, on a spring break vacation to Mars, to set things right by getting in contact with the other alien race («The Skolarians») and gathering enough clues to construct a super-device that will neutralize the harmful effect of «Mind Bending» and ruin the evil guys' plans.

The irony here is, at the least, two-fold. On one hand, the «Caponians» are a good excuse to poke some well-protected fun at the overall sad state of affairs in the field of human intelligence. At the very start of the game, if you make Zak sit through a TV report of what's going on, you get *quite* an edgy warning of "*If you've been feeling increasingly stupid lately, you're not alone!*" — which is somehow even more comforting to hear today than it was back in 1988. On the other hand, the plight of Zak, a disillusioned truth-seeker just aching to break out of the vicious circle of sensationalist tabloid fantasies, ultimately leads him to realize that it is only by fully and relentlessly embracing such fantasies that humanity can be saved in the first place. In other words, fire must be fought with fire: only the most fantastic and stupid strategies of action can help eliminate stupidity and get the world back on track.

This is, in all honesty, such a fabulous concept that I only wish it could have been better realized at a latter age; unlike *Maniac Mansion*, which, I believe, is fine just as it is, *Zak McKracken* is literally *screaming* to be remade with a bigger budget, more detailed script, sharper and less laconic dialog, and fuller character depictions. As it is, plot- and moral-wise the game is but a tasty shadow of what it could really have been even in the soon-to-come age of *Day Of The Tentacle*, let alone today. The entire story, including all the cutscenes, can be condensed into about half an hour; the rest of the playtime will be occupied by your trying to crack its puzzles and navigate its endless mazes. It's got enough time to poke fun at news of two-headed squirrels, golf-loving gurus, diplomated witch doctors, Martian aliens, and, of course, The King (what's a good game without at least one Elvis joke?), but it does all that in a pretty telegraphic style, which undermines its satire.

As with *Maniac Mansion*, one could argue that the game's pithiness is a source of charm in itself — if hilarious absurdity is the name of the game, why spoil it by adding unnecessary detail or, even worse, by attempts at expanded logical explanations of what is going on? The only problem with that is that *Maniac Mansion* had a perfect ambition-to-realization ratio: all the action took place inside one single location, with a fixed minimal number of characters whose goals and personalities could easily be established with just a handful of cutscenes and dialogs. *Zak McKracken* goes on an ambitious sprawl instead, taking you from one location to another without bothering to seriously invest into any of the places or people. Even the educational content is fairly limited — beyond learning the names of cities such as Katmandu or Kinshasa, or seizing the overall difference in visual style between Egypt and Mexico, you don't really get to enrich your knowledge, and, in fact, the game would hardly be recommendable for kids, not just because it is too difficult or too laconic, but also because it deliberately messes up fact and fantasy, which is hardly a great educational strategy. (Years later, Sierra's authors would come up with a good way to separate one from the other while designing *Pepper's Adventures In Time*, but that would already be a whole other age).

That the plot does not follow any clearly defined logical strategy is probably not a valid accusation for the game, whose absurdist nature calls for absurdist moves on the part of the protagonist — in order to find all the missing pieces for their magic artifact, Zak and Annie have to blindly grope around several different corners of the world (which can be quite a financial strain on your limited resources), just as often relying on their intuition as their counter-intuition. Sometimes, however, it does go wildly over the top, when Elvis (or, at least, a pretty darn good resemblance) is revealed as the leader of the Caponians, or when the spiritual link between the Holy Men of Nepal and the Congo takes on the form of a golf club; these ideas, naughtily sarcastic as they are on their own, probably fried the brains of many a game reviewer, eventually hurting sales and ensuring the game's future status of «cult favorite».

In the end, though, almost every element of the plot makes sense: *Zak McKracken* is a brilliantly well thought-out post-modern fable on the average person's mix of cultural stereotypes and superstitious (I wanted to write 'religious', but corrected myself before it was too late) beliefs. And it's well worth playing just to get to that bit at the end: "**CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE SAVED THE WORLD FROM STUPIDITY!**", followed by "*The people of Earth rapidly regained their former level of intelligence... and traded in good karma for the latest food fad: two-headed squirrel burgers!*" Somehow, more than 30 years since the release of the original game, there is still some sort of bitter prophetic ring to those lines. Perhaps we are still waiting for a real-life Zak McKracken to save the world from stupidity, so that we could all go back to our two-headed squirrel burgers instead of having to take in all that crazy shit the modern world keeps throwing at us, eh?

Puzzles

On the puzzling front, *Zak McKracken* has very few differences from *Maniac Mansion*: it uses the same interface of about a dozen different verbs, most of them combinable with a variety of complements = objects that Zak can pick up during his travels, and most of your time will be spent trying out the various combinations — sometimes randomly, because this is a batshit-crazy LucasArts game that typically requires batshit-crazy LucasArts-style logic to get by. If you're one of those «oh I hate adventure games because they offer insane, logic-defying puzzles» kind of guy, *Zak McKracken* is definitely *not* the game to try and change your state of mind.



One thing that makes *Zak* a definitely more difficult, and at times frustrating, experience compared to *Maniac Mansion*, is its sprawling nature. The Mansion was pretty big, but it was still a single location with all of its floors, corridors, and rooms combined. If you wanted, you could divide it into three chunks and set each of your playable characters to watch over one of them, which made things clean and efficient; a couple of playing hours later, you'd have the overall layout of the whole thing nicely settled in your head and it would be easy to work out which elements and objects in which part of the house relate to each other (or not). By contrast, the universe of *Zak* is quite gigantic, consisting of multiple disparate locations that can only be reached by taking plane rides that (a) take small, but valuable chunks of your time and (b) even worse, cost quite a bit of money that you can run out of. Forget to obtain a useful item in San Francisco (like, for instance, a pack of bread crumbs!), travel to Lima and watch yourself get fucked as you are hopelessly stuck on your mission *and* don't have a single penny left in your pocket to travel back home and pick up the required thingamajig.

Indeed, *Zak McKracken* is not only one of those very, very few LucasArts games that can be brought to a halt by the player *dying* — any of the four playable characters can get into a small handful of situations where they expire and the game needs to be restarted or restored — but also by the player getting stuck in an unwinnable situation, something that contemporary Sierra games were frequently accused for. To move around, Zak and Annie need money, and while there *are* ways to replenish your credit card, they come relatively late in the game; besides, it is theoretically possible to get stuck in some remote location

without the means of purchasing your next ticket *or* to make a quick buck anywhere in the vicinity. Additionally, while trying out different solutions, you can lose important objects that are necessary to complete vital quests — or, at one point, Zak can get stuck in a jail cell in Katmandu without any ways of getting out (Annie can help, but only if she has the financial means to get to Nepal *and* a necessary implement to call the shuttle to the airport from her San Francisco apartment).

All of this goes so blatantly against the established LucasArts strategies of pleasing the player that I can only explain it by the chronological factor: back in 1988, the laws set out by Ron Gilbert were in the early stage of application and did not require being fully shared by all the other designers. The (relative) underperformance of the game, compared to *Maniac Mansion*, probably convinced everybody that the Gilbert way of doing things was *the* way to go, and no other LucasArts game after *Zak McKracken* would dare inconvenience the player in any such manner. That said, taking good care of your save files and keeping a sharp eye on the state of your bank account is not that hard to do, that is, once you figure out that you actually *need* to do it: with most of the classic LucasArts games luring you into relaxing, it's easy to forget that a few of the early ones do demand that you keep your guard up.

A bigger problem than getting stuck because of doing something wrong might be getting stuck because of not knowing what to do. After you have properly explored San Francisco and met up with Annie to learn of the impending catastrophe and the one possible solution to prevent it, you are essentially placed in free-roam mode — and the game is pretty harsh on you when it comes to getting actual clues on where to go next, instead of blindly groping around the world in classic «*go-I-know-not-whither-and-fetch-I-know-not-what*» fashion. You *do* get some clues — which, every once in a while, require a bit of outside knowledge; for instance, connecting the dots on a cave painting reveals the image of an ankh, which logically suggests that your further adventures will have something to do with Egypt, provided you know what an ankh is (and even if you don't, neither the game itself nor the accompanying manual will ever insult your intelligence by offering an explanation). But it is more likely that most players will just keep on randomly putting Zak on a plane to whatever location, only to discover, half an hour later, that you are *not* in possession of that one particular important object you need to crack that location's task and have meaninglessly wasted your money on two plane tickets (or more, as some destinations can only be reached through a connecting flight).

Adding to the number of frustrating bits about the game's design is its accursed system of *mazes* (ugh!). Mazes will be waiting for you everywhere — in the African and South American jungles, inside the Egyptian pyramids, and even inside the Martian ruins. Now in most adventure games, mazes are merely the cheap equivalent of a proper puzzle when developers run out of budget for designing something more creative, tasking the player with finding an additional piece of paper and pencil for

several minutes of brainless tedium — but *Zak McKracken* actually does it worse by mixing a few real, fixed-design mazes with «pseudo-mazes», a set of randomly generated images where you should not memorize any paths, but rather just allow your character to wander and blunder until he randomly falls upon the blessed clearing. Since the game never warns you about which of the two maze types you are about to encounter, you may end up writing out maps for one-time only ghostly apparitions, and *not* writing out maps where you really need them. Honestly, while not particularly tragic, the maze system in *Zak McKracken* is simply one of the most stupid and annoying bits of design in the entire history of LucasArts.

The actual inventory-based puzzles, by comparison, are relatively simple; nothing stands out as particularly challenging or, for that matter, particularly memorable. Some of the challenges have alternate solutions, or (sometimes) can be performed by different characters with slightly different results. Some objects can be used differently; for instance, you can make regular use of the knife you find or you can bend it out of shape, eventually allowing you to make a profit *and* get an extra joke on the subject of modern art as well. Some puzzles require cooperation, similar to the tactics employed in *Maniac Mansion* (e.g. one character has to hold down a lever while the other goes through a door, etc.). All in all, not a lot to write about. The main challenge of the game is to really familiarize yourself with the scope of its universe — oh, and to watch out for those precious hotspots, of course (arguably the easiest way to get stuck is to miss some tiny pixelated area on the screen that contains the proper object to interact with).

Atmosphere

It may be a bit random, but remembering that the game came out in 1988, I can't help but be reminded of yet another title from the same year where you had to deal with a protagonist pulled out of the relative chic and comfort of West Coast civilization and plunged into a world of exciting, dangerous, and bewildering adventure — Sierra's *Leisure Suit Larry Goes Looking For Love*, with the game's first act taking place in Los Angeles rather than San Francisco. The contrast, held up by the plot, the graphics, and the suspense, was



quite striking — and at the same time, the game humorously played on all the similarities between life in L.A. and life on the tropical islands of the Pacific, poking intelligent fun at globalization and commercialization (which most players and critics probably missed in their avid hunt for smut, smut, and more smut).

In some ways, *Zak McKracken* does the same, as Zak discovers the influence of the modern world on many of the locations he visits — from the African witch doctor's diploma from «*Watsamatta University, Master of Cranial Diminishment*» to the interiors of «*The Friendly Hostel*» all the way up on Mars. However, on the whole the game remains stuck in the same kind of zany parallel reality as most of the classic LucasArts titles, and its style is more reminiscent of a comic book than a comedy movie. Dialog throughout the game is sparse, terse, and minimal (as compared, for instance, to Al Lowe's totally unstoppable verbosity — often brilliant, but sometimes verging on obsessively annoying), and its attention to detail is... well, let's say, sporadic: every once in a while, there is something random out there just for the sake of humor, but it feels tacked on just so there'd be at least *something* of the «world-building» variety and not directly and strictly related to the plot. As in *Maniac Mansion*, there's a suspicion of the game designers still being stuck way too much in the «text adventure game» mode, where the very nature of the game prohibited the writers from piling up too much detail.

(One good illustrative example: in both *Zak McKracken* and *Larry II*, players find themselves aboard a plane with a rude and obnoxious stewardess explaining flight rules. Dialog from *Zak*: "If we lose cabin pressure, oxygen masks should appear. But don't count on it." Dialog from *Larry*: "Oh, and if during our flight those cute little yellow masks happen to drop down from their overhead compartments... why, just ignore them. Lately, those practical jokers in maintenance have been substituting nitrous oxide for the oxygen again!" Feel the difference in style? To be fair, though, the humor level in both these takes is quite comparable, so the less-is-more principle applies fairly well to *Zak McKracken* on occasion).

Even so, *Zak McKracken* is still a unique experience in its own way. There was always something disarmingly charming about *Maniac Mansion*'s minimalism, which, of course, stemmed not from any kind of intentional designer philosophy, but from the limitations of its age — small budget, tiny staff, rudimentary technologies, first experience — and for all the innumerable ways in which *Day Of The Tentacle* would have it beat five years later, it would do so at the inevitable expense of that laconicity. *Zak McKracken*, however, arrived just in time to recapture that atmosphere and apply it to the world at large, rather than spend it all on one particular location. Now you have Zak arrive in Peru and find an «*Ancient Incan Bird Feeder: Fill Only With Dry Bread Crumbs*», because why the hell not? Besides, some people might actually get tired of drowning in waves upon waves of LucasArts' patented humor in later games — *Zak McKracken*, by using it sparingly, comes across as more of a real puzzler than an excuse to crack off as many jokes as possible, regardless of quality (yeah I'm lookin' at you *Curse Of Monkey Island!*)

Finally, as in *Maniac Mansion*, there is a bit of tension and suspense here — after Zak receives the ability to transmogrify into the spirits of birds and animals, the Caponians begin to sense his presence and you have to remember to quickly clear out of recently visited locations to prevent yourself from being captured. Capture never leads to death (just a temporary round of brainwashing that eventually results in Zak getting back to normal), but it still delays your progress, so getting captured is never a good thing (actually, it's worse than what it was in *Maniac Mansion*, where getting thrown into the dungeon only meant that you had to activate another member of the party to get you out — here, you get automatically transported back to San Francisco, meaning you will probably need to spend a large wad of money on your next airplane ticket). That said, given the overall hilarious appearance of the Caponians (who prefer to masquerade as a cross between Groucho Marx and Super Mario), the threat of capture makes you more fidgety than terrified — there's really no space for proper «nightmare fuel» in a LucasArts game, even despite all the actual nightmares that Zak has to go through every time he goes to sleep.

Technical features

Graphics

In terms of technical and mechanical improvements, *Zak McKracken* suffers even more from being released so close to *Maniac Mansion* than in the substance department: with the same game engine (SCUMM), same tech specs, and more or less the same programming and art team, the original game, released for DOS in the fall of 1988, has fairly little to distinguish it from the style of its much more notorious predecessor. In 1989, both games were re-released for DOS in special enhanced versions with increased graphic resolution, and these versions, for most of the pre-emulator era, have remained their default forms on PC. (*Maniac Mansion* was also ported to NES, but it looks *really* horrible in its Nintendo version).

One big advantage, however, that *Zak McKracken* holds over *Maniac Mansion* is that it was lucky enough to be eligible for re-release on the Japanese market for Fujitsu's FM Towns computing systems, which had native VGA resolution with 256 colors



and used CD-ROM technology, allowing for better audio. Of course, back in 1990 only the Japanese buyers, or those lucky enough to own an imported model, could enjoy the game in such a revolutionary format; today, though, when everything back from the 20th century is only played through emulation software, the FM Towns version is just as easily playable through ScummVM as the original EGA version, and for retro-gamers, it has pretty much replaced the original (for instance, it is the FM Towns version that is being sold on GoodOldGames as the default option).

It's not exactly a stupendous upgrade, and there are a few graphic perks to the enhanced DOS version that the FM Towns one somehow lost in transition; careful comparison of the actual frames shows that some details have been cut out or smoothed over, and sometimes the simple colorful vibrancy of EGA gives out a brighter and cozier vibe than its shade-of-grey replacement in the VGA version. On the whole, though, the FM Towns variety unquestionably offers more depth to the experience, and I can easily confirm the recommendation as first choice, with the enhanced DOS and the Amiga versions lagging not far behind.

As in *Maniac Mansion*, the verb-based interface continues, unfortunately, to eat up about a third of the screen, making the game's locations unroll as a sort of narrow scrolling tapestry — also the same principle as in *Maniac Mansion*, except that this time around, you really spend most of your time either in the open air or inside mazes and corridors, so the scrolling is pretty much ubiquitous. The art style is relatively generic and perfunctory, but the images do their job well enough — the Pyramids do look imposing, the red Martian desert does look mysteriously haunting, and the Katmandu temple area does look rather outrageously gauche and tourist-ey. Not really sure what else can be said here.

Sound

This, even more so than the graphics, is where the FM Towns version really comes to life. The DOS version, like *Maniac Mansion*, was only accompanied by PC speaker support, so it stayed silent for most of the time, and when it didn't, you most certainly wish it would — the opening music theme and the few sound effects scattered throughout have hardly aged well when represented by bleeps and beeps, to put it mildly. With full CD-ROM support, however, the 1990 version was able to feature a full musical score (unfortunately, no speech), and although the main theme still sounds terrible when converted to MIDI (like one of those «kick-ass» electronic dance compositions in the opening titles to Eighties' police dramas and porn flicks), the rest of the soundtrack is not too shabby.

Well, actually, it *is* pretty shabby, because the dynamic musical segments usually play like forgettable elevator muzak. But the bits that are more ambient in nature play pretty darn well, nicely reflecting local styles (with expectable sitars in the

Katmandu section, congas and bongos in the Central African section, and swirling psychedelic flutes in the Egyptian section). From a purely audio perspective, the best segment would probably be Mars, with haunting gusts of wind adding to the overall spookiness of the desert and mystical ambient soundscapes resonating across the corridors of the huge Martian maze. If the main musical accompaniment to the game cannot be said to have properly survived the judgement of time, the sonic ambience of it is atmospherically admirable even today. Playing the game on mute during those segments really takes away an entire dimension, which is ultimately *the* reason why the DOS and FM Towns versions play like two different experiences.

Interface

Predictably, following so closely upon the heels of *Maniac Mansion*, *Zak McKracken* borrows its revolutionary interface without any significant changes. A large chunk of the screen ends up occupied with a list of verbs, which you can then combine either with clickable hotspots on the graphic screen or with inventory items listed under the verbs; the basic list itself only undergoes a few minor changes — for instance, an important element of Zak's routine is the ability to change into different costumes, so commands such as *FIX* or *UNLOCK* have been replaced with *PUT ON* and *TAKE OFF*, but otherwise it's all exactly the same. An additional command allows you to switch between Zak and the three girl characters once you have «unlocked» them in the story, and the same slot allows Zak to transmutate between his proper shape and an animal identity (for some reason, this one took me a bit of time to figure out, after a few moments of panicking that I'd have to be stuck forever as a cud-chewing lazy-ass yak in Katmandu!).



While there is absolutely nothing wrong with two or more games running on exactly the same version of the engine — Sierra did that in droves, though, admittedly, their business model allowed them to pump out far more product over a year-long period than LucasArts — it's still a little symbolic of *Zak McKracken's* downfall: for all the different vibes it gave, things like that only reinforced the general feeling that it was really just an unimaginative clone of its predecessor. For quick comparison, already the year after that *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* would at least diversify the interface with a choice-based dialog system (not to count all of its questionable, but imaginative mini-games), and then along came *Loom* with all of its

painfully-ahead-of-its-time features... next to these advances, *Zak* does feel like a clone when it comes to pure gameplay. Fortunately for it, innovation in gameplay mechanics is just about the very last parameter on my mind in calculating the overall enjoyability of a gaming experience!

Verdict: *Definitely not enough to save the world from stupidity, but does at least give you something to think about.*

It is difficult for me to make an unconditional recommendation for *Zak McKracken & The Alien Mindbenders*. On the technical front, it is such a blatant imitation of *Maniac Mansion* that it hardly has any place in the history of video game evolution. On the «fun» front, it can be confusing and frustrating even for the seasoned retro-gamer — not only because it is a rare case of a LucasArts game where you can unexpectedly die or, worse, get stuck in a dead-end situation, but also because of its seemingly austere approach to clues and ugly mazes. It's really easy as heck to build up a condemning case here and state that, for a brief while, the studio «lost its way» before the next wave of successful innovations came along.



And yet, at the same time, I still feel a bit of genuine fondness for the universe built up by David Fox — a more expansive, meaningful, and mature take on the absurdist realities of *Maniac Mansion*. I like how the mundane and the surreal, the entertaining and the educational, the idealistic and the sarcastic bits intertwine with each other; how the game, while never officially taking itself seriously, subtly implants the almost religious idea of everything in the universe being connected by the same laws and patterns; how it tries to go beyond the pure, unadulterated parody of *Maniac Mansion* to deliver subtle hints at the less-than-satisfactory state of humanity (note that the game action is officially set in 1997, a mere decade into the future). That tiny cult of Zak McKracken fans that still persisted until at least the 2000s (the German fan game *Zak McKracken: Between Time And Space* was released in 2008 and remastered in 2015), I am sure, owes its existence to pretty much the same feelings, rather than any formulaic admiration for the game's mechanics and «fun factor».

Perhaps — who knows? — that intermingling between Fox and Gilbert did, after all, result in compromising Fox's original vision, and *perhaps* Zak McKracken could have come out even better, had it adopted a more serious tone. One of the most

common criticisms of LucasArts, after all, is that the studio was never able to produce anything but sheer goofy comedy (*Loom* being just about the only exception to the rule), and theoretically I could see somebody like Fox diversifying its portfolio. But, first of all, this is just speculation, and second, it's just as possible that the game would have devolved into pedantic and insipid «edutainment» instead. As it stands, *Zak McKracken* is the kind of game that invites you, every once in a while, to stop and think about its content rather than just concentrate exclusively on beating its puzzles and getting the final achievement of «saving the world from stupidity» without bothering to think about the metaphorical implications of your actions — or, at least, about the true nutritional values of two-headed squirrel burgers.