

# review: Zig Zag

by Greg Kramer

Type: Word Game

Publisher: Quantum Quality Productions, (908/788-2799)

Retail Price: \$49.95

Street Price: \$35.00

Requires: LCII or better, System 6.08 or later, 4MB RAM

Protection: None

Power Mac Native: No

Picture yourself in a boat by an atoll. A mighty and learned warrior stands before the venerable king who has ruled wisely and bravely since his people came to this nirvanic land, these islands named after the mythic ruler who discovered them. . . Hawaii Loa. The young warrior has been chosen to succeed the legendary monarch, but only if he can complete a series of quests and solve baffling secret word puzzles. The quests will try every fiber of the young man's soul and body: he must row a solitary and fragile outrigger canoe through the entire length of the Hawaiian Islands, swim through shark-infested waters, and challenge the gods themselves by crossing supernatural sacred ground. The word puzzles along the way will stretch the furthest boundaries of the young man's mind, imagination, and logic. You must stand in the shoes of the men who braved this test to ascend to the throne of the ancient Hawaiian kingdom. Sound exciting? Sound challenging? Sound like a word game? Well, it is and its called "Zig Zag."

Word games are a strange breed in computer gaming. The massive and speedy intelligence of a computer is well-suited to making them fast-paced enjoyable diversions. However, they are not inherently action-packed, and in this short attention span, "Doom"-paced world that sets the tempo to which we all dance, that is, sadly, a shortcoming.

It's hard, then, to blame computer game wardens when they try to jazz up a simple but challenging word game with a little good old-fashioned adventure. If they succeed, then you've got a game which lures you in with its simplicity and then spits you out of a coma who-knows-how-much-later, eyes red, knuckles sore with no idea that your partner has left you, the dog has taken to eating dryer lint and your finger nails have grown longer than your

forearm. If, however, a game fails to combine the crucial elements of addictive adrenaline-pumping excitement and devious mental challenge, then you have something mostly akin to watching your old uncle Saul trying to do the Hustle. Not a pretty picture.

In any event, to be effective, the game itself must be strong and challenging, but simple enough to learn quickly ("Scrabble" is the classic example). The bells and whistles must heighten the excitement in some way and not detract from or cheapen the game. By this standard, "Zig Zag" is a good word game, but its unfortunate presentation makes it doubtful that I will be stumbling to bed at dawn shaking off the effects of a "Zig Zag" trance.

**I Am a Man of Few Words.** The object of the game is suitably simple: decipher a secret word of a given number of letters using test words to deduce the letters and which position they hold. Each puzzle requires you to enter 10 test words, each of a fixed length and position. For example, one test word may be three letters in the fourth, fifth and sixth positions in the secret word. When a test word is entered, it is scored: 250 points for identifying a letter in the word (a "Zag") and 1000 points for putting the letter in its correct position (a "Zig"). Thus, if the secret word is "GAME" and I enter a test word "GO" with "G" in the second position, then I get 250 points. If, instead, the "G" were in the first position, I would get 1000.

Included with the manual and available in the help screens online are sample games explaining the logic and strategy behind an average game. This is, by far, the best way to learn this game; if you read no other part of the manual, study the sample games carefully.

To assist in solving the puzzle, the game features a letter status chart. Letters found to not belong in the puzzle can be eliminated, while possible letters can be marked with a question mark until, through proof or educated guessing, they can be marked with an "X". Once the position of a letter is known, all other letters in the position can be eliminated with one click of the mouse. This is a very useful tool, even for the experienced player, to track guesses and organize tactics.

The game provides a number of variables to customize the challenge of play. The player selects the skill level and the number of letters in the secret word. Skill level is based on a combination of the possibility of repeating letters, the inclusion of unusual letters, the configuration of the test words and obscurity of the word. Thus, at the highest level, the secret word will likely have at least one repeating letter, one or more little-used letters (i.e., Z, K, X, Q), lots of short test words positioned to make guessing more difficult, and be something like "zeidae" (a family of marine fishes including the John Dorys, in case you wondered). It takes a fair number of plays to find your skill level but, once found, they do prove fairly consistent. After a few games, I have played successfully but challengingly on the same skill level. In spite of this, I found, that the skill levels involved too many elements. Allowing the player to set the difficulty of the secret word independent of the test word configuration would provide a greater challenge.

For a further challenge and very different mental test, you can also play "Zig Zag" with numbers instead of letters. It might also be amusing to be able to play the game in its native Hawaiian with its challenge of triple and even quadruple vowel combinations. Come to think of it, maybe Hawaii Loa had it right that the game serves as a test of leaders. In my book, forcing presidential candidates to solve word puzzles would be funny enough, but I might just hemorrhage watching Clinton and Dole trying to divine "KEANU" with nothing but words like "POI" and "ALOHA" to guide them.

It told, Zig Zag is an intriguing and original word game that invites some repeated play and is occasionally capable of being truly engrossing. However, there is something missing; something hollow that tells me I will not be playing this game months from now. It may be that the only real element of competition is the high score board. It may be that while the learning curve to simply play the game is quite short, to be able to play for a high score takes far more time than the game justifies. These are significant, but the real problem lies in the presentation of the package as a whole.

**The Quests and Other Bells and Whistles.** If the word game at the core of Zig Zag were the entire package, I might have liked it more. However, the special effects, sounds, animation and environment not only add little to the game, they actually detract from it.

The Quests are nothing more than pictures with overlaying grids. Your hero Zaggy (more on him later) must move across this grid to a goal by solving puzzles of various lengths; for instance, a five letter secret word moves him five spaces. There are some obstacles which must be avoided and penalties for incorrect words. There are also "black pearls" strewn across the board which can be collected to multiply your score. The pearls are actually just black squares with numbers in them. Far from adding drama or any heightened sense of achievement, I dare say that the quests just do nothing; they aren't even particularly good graphics. I might feel different if, for instance, the obstacles moved! For what its worth, if you choose the CD-ROM version of the game you get two extra Quests.

I reserve my most withering fury, however, for the music, sounds and the irrepressible Zaggy. For those lovers of Don Ho and Elvis in the crowd, I offer my apologies in advance, but the sounds of "Blue Hawaii," "Tiny Bubbles," "Hawaiian Wedding Song," "Aloha Oe," and "Pearly Shells" are not exactly my favorites. They don't, themselves, send me hurtling towards the fire exits, but when rendered in simple computerized tones they become absolutely nerve-racking. The sound effects are amusing for a time, but they wear thin quickly. Finally, appearing throughout the game delivering quips and accompanying cheers and jeers is Zaggy. He's a simplistically animated superhero-ish little fellow who jumps for joy with your victories and chastises you for your failures. Luckily, he's not totally irrepressible. . . he can be turned off.

**The Skinny.** In fact, it is possible to play Zig Zag without any of the extra features (though they take up about 3/4 of the disk space). Then you are left with simply a pretty good game but not one so good that it couldn't use a little bit of effective glitz and drama. The extras here seem to be a noble attempt to strike the tenuous balance between style and substance, but for my money and disk space, they are simply too half-hearted to be anything but annoying at worse and pointless at best.

#### Pros

- Strong and challenging word game with customizable skill levels
- Massive dictionary from which the games pulls obscure and common words alike

#### Cons

- Quickly annoying sound effects and animation
- Essentially pointless Quests that try to put the game in a larger context, but are basically a waste of valuable memory
- Dull, lifeless graphics and animation