

review by Jeff Frey

.5 stars — 1 Star Poor, 5 Stars Excellent

Title: Food Chain

Version: 1.0

Developer: Cajun Games

Price: \$9.95 , demo available

Contact Info: <http://www.cajungames.com/>

Genre: Puzzle/Mind Game

Requirements: 68040 or higher, System 7.1.2 or later, at least 5 MB of free RAM, 9 MB free disk space, CD-ROM.

astes Like Chicken!

What's one of the central tenets people use to describe life in our world? Kill or be killed... fight or flight... the strong versus the weak. Our buddy Charles Darwin told us that natural selection dictates who will and will not make it through a long, full life. Natural selection is aided by the natural hierarchy of "power" among the animals: who eats who. That hierarchy is called the food chain.

The natural food chain would be an extremely long, complex document if we took the time to write it. What the folks from Cajun Games have done, though, is to narrow the chain down to four specific animals. Each animal, when placed on the playing board (which resembles a small piece of land), eats some other animal and is eaten by a different animal. Each animal eats, and each animal is eaten. For instance, the green "Seasaur," when facing the yellow

"Hovenboof," will walk to the Hovenboof's square and eat him. At the same time, the red "Magmaraptor" will eat the Seaosaur. One of the skills one must learn very quickly when playing Food Chain is who eats whom.

Also important to gameplay are the special skills. Each animal possesses a special skill, ranging from cannibalism to flying, which greatly adds to gameplay and strategy-making. Normally, for an animal to eat another he must be in the square adjacent to that animal. Additionally, the "eater" must be facing the "eatee." The Magmaraptor's special ability lies in the fact that he will fly from his square to any square directly ahead of him if the square in question contains a Seaosaur (the prey of the Magmaraptor). The purple "Yug-Yug" has the uncanny ability to eat one of his own kind — unarguably a "special" skill.

The game begins with two of each animal on the game board. The game is then played by placing more animals on the board in empty squares. The occasional rain storm and instant death tokens spice up the action a bit. In the end, the game is over once one of the four animal species has gone extinct, i.e. is no longer present on the board. Your job: keep them alive and well. If something dies, it turns into a spot of grass. Let that spot of grass prosper too long and a tree blocks your square. Let too many trees pop up and you certainly won't be able to eat anything. Oh, sure, it's much more complex than that... but you get the drift.

implicit is the Key

It seems that the key factor behind the development of Food Chain was in keeping the game as simple as possible. There is really no need for a net play mode, so the extra baggage of that particular feature is not present. Multiplayer games would be pointless as well. Sorry folks, Food Chain wouldn't make much of a party game, it really is for just one person flying solo at the controls.

Just because the game has a simple design doesn't mean that Cajun skimmed on the two staples of gaming: graphics and sound. Where I was expecting a game board layout much like checkers or chess with static game pieces sitting motionless on the board, I got much more. Each animal has its own signature animations. When a Seaosaur eats a Hovenboof, I actually got to see the Seaosaur wrap his tongue around the Hovenboof and pull the poor beast into his mouth. The Yug-Yug's spear

is not just for show; he literally uses it to spear a Magmaraptor for dinner.

The animated graphics wouldn't make much of an impact without the associated sounds. Each time you perform any action in the game you receive audio feedback. When you place the rain cloud over a square you hear a lovely spring shower as the square fills with water. When the Hovenboof bags a Yug-Yug you hear a pathetic little squeel as the poor Yug-Yug slides into the yellow creature's stomach. A simple but relaxing soundtrack accompanies the game, providing background music the entire time. Again, the sounds are simple, but they're also high quality and just enough to add something to the game play.

lay it Again, Sam

While the story behind Food Chain is a novel idea to the world of computer games, the initial intrigue wears off quickly. Unlike some games where the plot is revealed slowly to force a player to continue hour after hour, Food Chain plays most of its cards almost immediately. The first time I played the game I was surprised by the fact that the animals actually die if they're not fed, but from then on I knew to watch their life meters. Overall, I found it difficult to play the game again since the initial challenge of discovering how the game worked was gone. I think it's best to compare Food Chain to the classic Tetris or the neo-classical Snood. I always found that I could play Tetris for a few hours and then put it away; a few days later I was ready to play again. Food Chain is much the same: unlike an RPG which may bring you back daily, Food Chain will have you returning when you're ready for a mental challenge again.

The people at Cajun Games already have a contingency plan for encouraging replay of Food Chain. There is currently an ongoing contest centering on high scores in the game, and Cajun promises future contests, as well. At the end of the game you are given your score with a contest code. These two tidbits of information are then used to enter the contest. Please note that my score shown below is definitely not worthy of entering the contest!

hink Different

Much like Apple's much-lauded ad campaign, Cajun Games has come up with a very original, very different kind of game. Not only can an individual garner some entertainment from playing the game, but I can see a definite educational advantage to it as well. My father is a biology teacher, and upon seeing the game commented that it appeared to be an excellent way to teach kids about natural selection and the real food chain. In a day when computer games can cost as much as a dinner for two at the Ritz, Food Chain's \$9.95 price tag is very reasonable. The programmers at Cajun obviously put a lot of time and effort into making Food Chain a quality Mac title, and the finished product definitely showcases their abilities to make that concept a reality.

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