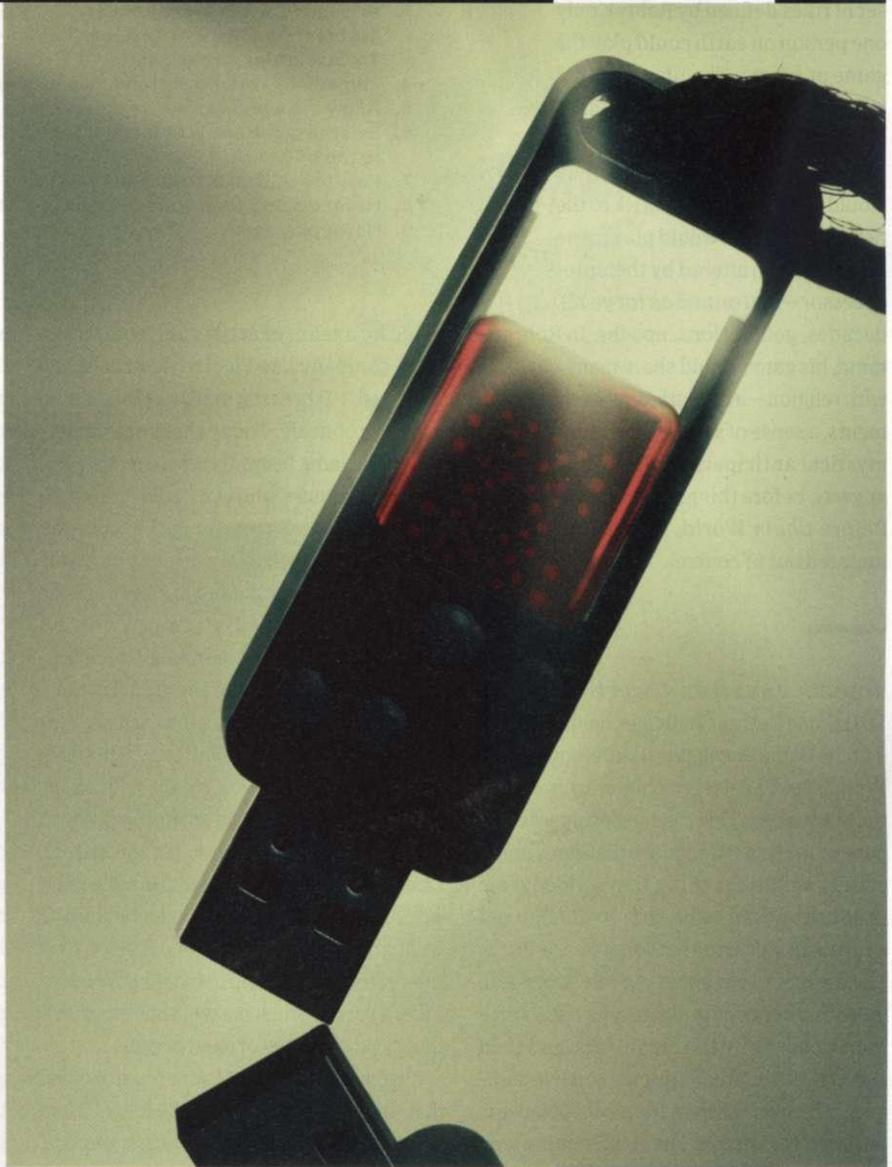


BIGGER THAN JESUS

When Jason Rohrer created *hlsChain World* videogame, he intended it to be a religion. He just didn't expect a holy war.

BY JASON FAGONE



The USB memory stick contained the sole copy of a videogame unlike any created before.

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ASON ROHRER IS KNOWN as much for his eccentric lifestyle as for the brilliant, unusual games he designs. He lives mostly off the grid in the desert town of Las Cruces, New Mexico. He doesn't own a car or believe in vaccination. The 33-year-old works out of a home office, typing code in a duct-taped chair. He takes his son Mez to gymnastics and acting class on his lime-green recumbent bicycle, and on weekends he paints with his son Ayza. (He got Mez's name from a license plate, and Ayza's by mixing up Scrabble tiles.)

On the morning of February 24, Rohrer took a break from coding and pedaled to the local Best Buy. He paid \$19.99 for a 4-gigabyte USB memory stick sheathed in black plastic. The next day he sanded off the memory stick's logos, giving it a brushed-metal texture that reminded him

of something out of *Mad Max*. Then, using his kids' acrylics, he painted a unique pattern on both sides, a chain of dots that resembled a piece of Aboriginal art he had seen.

The stick would soon hold a videogame unlike any other ever created. It would exist on the memory stick and nowhere else. According to a set of rules defined by Rohrer, only one person on earth could play the game at a time. The player would modify the game's environment as they moved through it. Then, after the player died in the game, they would pass the memory stick to the next person, who would play in the digital terrain altered by their predecessor—and on and on for years, decades, generations, epochs. In Rohrer's mind, his game would share many qualities with religion—a holy ark, a set of commandments, a sense of secrecy and mortality and mystical anticipation. This was the idea, anyway, before things started to get weird. Before *Chain World*, like religion itself, mutated out of control.

ROHRER UNVEILED *Chain World* at the 2011 Game Design Challenge, held on March 4 at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. The design challenge is essentially a contest: Three game designers compete to make a videogame that does some crazily ambitious thing that a videogame is not supposed to be able to do, like tell a love story or win the Nobel Peace Prize. The designers get about six weeks to come up with a concept or prototype based on a theme chosen by the organizers, and then they get 15 minutes to pitch it to a live audience. Whoever receives the most applause is declared the winner. The challenge is a way for the best minds in the field to flaunt their chops, as well as a marker of how rapidly games have evolved. When game designer Eric Zimmerman launched the first challenge seven years ago, a videogame was typically

JASON FAGONE (@jfagone) wrote about algorithm competitions in issue 18.12.

The 9 Commandments of *Chain World*

Game designer Jason Rohrer was challenged to create a game that was also a religion. As with any good game, or any good religion, it came with a set of straightforward rules. Just plug the flash drive containing his creation into your USB port and follow these steps.

1. Run *Chain World* via one of the included "run_ChainWorld" launchers.
2. Start a single-player game and pick "Chain World."
3. Play until you die exactly once.
 - 3a. Erecting signs with text is forbidden—your works must speak for themselves.
 - 3b. Suicide is permissible.
4. Immediately after dying and respawning, quit to the menu.
5. Allow the world to save.
6. Exit the game and wait for your launcher to automatically copy *Chain World* back to the USB stick.
7. Pass the USB stick to someone else who expresses interest.
8. Never discuss what you saw or did in *Chain World* with anyone.
9. Never play again.

made by a team of artists and coders at a large company like Electronic Arts; it had guns and 3-D breasts, and you played it on a PC or a console. Today there are numerous indie game festivals where people like Rohrer—auteurs who work solo or in small groups and whose games might be conceptually innovative, personal, or simply bizarre—discuss how videogames can become the great art form of the 21st century.

The challenge is the one place where people from the two sides of the industry meet every year to battle as equals. The winner of the inaugural challenge, in 2004, was Will Wright of *SimCity/Sims* fame; his love-story game twisted an ordinary World War II shooter into a "first-person kisser." Last year's champion hailed from the indie world: Jenova Chen, the designer behind the trippy, zenlike games *flOw* and *Flower*, took the prize for a concept he called *Heaven-Ville*, a sort of stock market that measures the social currency of dead people.

Challenge organizer Zimmerman decided that this year's theme would be Bigger Than Jesus: games as religion. ("My first thought was, oh my God, it couldn't have been a more inappropriate topic for me to tackle," Rohrer says. "I'm an atheist.") It was timely, since much of the liveliest territory in gaming these days involves the ways that games can influence our real-world behavior. Massively popular social games like *FarmVille* and its clones permeate everyday life in a

way that is both low-key and ubiquitous. The broader idea that game mechanics *should* permeate life is known as gamification. There are commercial uses of gamification (getting consumers to engage more deeply with a brand or service) and political/philanthropic uses (getting people to use less gas, say), but either way, gamification advocates—like religious figures—seek to superimpose an invisible reward system on top of the world. Many gamers find this ethos patronizing, as if games were simply Skinner boxes for manipulating people into buying burgers or donating to Darfur charities. And if the detractors have a champion, it's Jason Rohrer. More than any other game designer, Rohrer embodies the idea that games can be ends in themselves, expressions of the ineffable. His most famous title, *Passage*, simulates an entire human lifespan in five minutes. *Inside a Star-Filled Sky* is a shooter that explores the idea of infinity. "All his ideas fit together pragmatically in a way that seems very spiritually serendipitous, but that's really just him being a smart designer," says Leigh Alexander, a journalist who covered this year's challenge for the industry news site Gamasutra.

Rohrer turned out to be the only one of the three competitors who really addressed the theme head-on. Returning champion Jenova Chen, speaking to a packed room of a thousand gamers who were tweeting or live-blogging like mad, delivered a vague, meandering mono-

logue about consumerism and positive psychology before proposing some sort of user-feedback widget for the TED website. His presentation was met with silence, followed by polite, confused applause. John Romero was punchier and fared better. The cocreator of *Doom* and *Quake* led the audience through a game that unfolded in real time, a simulation of early Christianity centered on a Twitter account he had just created. Romero proclaimed that the first 12 followers of @messiah6502 would be "apostles," seeking followers in the audience and spreading "miracles."

In retrospect, the remarkable thing about Rohrer's talk is how straightforward it was. From his games, you'd expect him to be mopey and severe, but in person he's downright bubbly. Nearly 6'8" and pencil-thin with a gaunt, handsome face, Rohrer took the podium wearing loose-fitting jeans and a hoodie, and in a span of 13 minutes he captured the audience's imagination, not by describing some ecstatic vision but simply by explaining the step-by-step process of how he solved a hard problem.

How do you make a videogame that, in some sense, is a religion, especially if you're an atheist? Rohrer began by defining the sort of spiritual practice that interested him, which had to do with the physical mysteries of everyday human experience. Rohrer spoke about his late grandfather, a colorful man who served as mayor of a small town in Ohio and left behind a legacy that soon turned into legends—the house he had built and the interstate whose path he had altered, forcing it to swerve around his town. ("It's like my grandfather's dogleg," Rohrer said, putting up a slide of a bend in I-77.) In Rohrer's family, these physical places had been turned into shrines of a sort. "We become like gods to those who come after us," Rohrer told the crowd.

He wanted his game to encourage players to contemplate the monuments of those gods, which meant that he needed an environment where you could build things for



In March at the Game Developers Conference, Jason Rohrer (left) bequeathed the flash drive that held his game to a complete stranger, Jia Ji.

future players to stumble across and ponder. He put up a slide of *Minecraft*, which is like an adventure game crossed with an inexhaustible virtual Lego set. *Minecraft* lets you roam across plains, mountains, and deserts, laying down textured cubes to construct shelters or pretty much anything you can imagine. YouTube is full of clips featuring player-designed *Minecraft* environments: blocky pixelated cityscapes, famous landmarks like Mount Rushmore, geek touchstones like the *Starship Enterprise*. *Chain World*, Rohrer explained, was a mod, a customized version of *Minecraft* and a set of scripts that govern how it's played. And here was the cool part: It all lived on a single USB memory stick.

Rohrer then dug the hand-painted stick out of his jeans pocket. "This is the only one in the world!" he said. "And here are the

rules, the canon law of *Chain World*." He outlined his commandments. Erect no signs—your creations must speak for themselves. Play until you die exactly once—no do-overs or restarts. (Zombies and spiders occasionally blink into existence to harry players as they build and explore.) Never talk about what you saw or did. Then pass the memory stick on to "someone who expresses interest." Rohrer said that he had been player one, the first to leave a mark on *Chain World*. "I had one of the most heartbreaking and poignant deaths, way too soon, that I've ever experienced in a videogame," he said. "And my child, who was sitting there, was in tears, and he wanted to tear this out of the back of my computer and stomp on it. 'We didn't do anything for them! We didn't leave

anything for them to discover!" He sighed. "So, someone in the audience is going to get to be player... two," Rohrer said, holding the stick out in front of him. The audience erupted in cries, and Rohrer saw several people he knew in the front row grasping the air. "I can't give it to a friend," he laughed.

Then the presenter playing God looked down and saw a crippled man standing before him. He was short and wore rimless

glasses. With one hand he gripped a metal walker, and with the other he reached up for *Chain World*.
I can't believe this is happening, Rohrer thought. He placed the stick in the man's palm. What he said next was misheard by several people as "Be healed," but it was actually more of a startled bleat: "Hunn-yaaaaayy!" Rohrer returned to the dais, and the man with the walker muttered, "Thanks," and bowed his head to the crowd.
Rohrer won the applause vote easily, and word of *Chain World* soon rippled out beyond the room. A writer for the enthusiast site IGN gushed, "On Friday, March 4, I witnessed something incredible." A writer at the UK gaming site Rock, Paper Shotgun posted, "I feel desperately sad that I will almost certainly never see *Chain World*, but overjoyed that it's out there, somewhere, evolving in secret."

One person wished a tsunami "had killed Jia Ji and washed the flash drive to someone who could follow the rules."

JIA JI, THE MAN to whom Rohrer handed *Chain World*, is not actually handicapped. What he is, he says, is "kind of a klutz." He was using a walker the day of the challenge because, the night before, he had injured himself dancing at a game-industry party thrown by Electronic Arts.

According to Ji, at the moment he stood up

in the front row and leaned over his walker to grab the USB stick, all he was thinking was "Cool game. I want to play." The 27-year-old had kicked around for years on the fringes of the game industry, designing fitness software for the elderly (think of a seniorize version of *DanceDance Revolution*) and coding flower algorithms for an online multiplayer game called *Tale in the Desert*. In 2008, after an earthquake dev-

astated the Chinese province of Sichuan, where Ji was born, he switched his focus to charity, launching the startup Couchange.org to help nonprofits raise funds by accepting donations via "abandoned assets" like frequent-flier miles and old gift cards.

Twenty minutes after the challenge, Ji happened to see a Goldilocks-haired woman named Jane McGonigal descending an escalator at the convention center. McGonigal is the foremost evangelist of gamification; she wrote the best seller *Reality Is Broken* about the world-changing power of games and promoted it on *The Colbert Report*. A vague idea occurred to Ji, a new purpose for *Chain World*. He asked McGonigal if she would play the game at some future date, for a good cause. She readily agreed. Now in "fund-raising mode," Ji says he extracted a similar promise from Will Wright. In Ji's conception for *Chain World*, an "amateur" would bid for the chance to get the USB stick next, then pass it to a celebrity world-builder, who would pass it to the next amateur to place a winning bid. In this way, the amateurs and pros would be playing on the same turf, "almost like charity golf outings," Ji says.

But who was Ji to alter Rohrer's design? Well, wasn't that the whole point of the game? As a player, "you're the god of *Chain World*," Ji says. "You can set edicts."

Ji went straight from the Game Developers Conference to Hawaii. He would spend the next three months hiking around the Big Island, sleeping on couches and crashing for a time with a hippie community he was helping to raise money. To protect the *Chain World* drive from moisture, Ji carried it inside his emergency medical bag, which also contained numbing gel, a credit-card swiper for an iPhone, and tampons ("for, like, gushing wounds").

A week after the challenge, Ji posted an eBay auction for the memory stick. "This charity auction is for the third player slot for *Chain World*," he wrote, adding that the auction winner must agree to send the game to McGonigal after playing it. He linked to a quick-and-dirty site, chainworld.org, where he had listed upcoming player slots; Will Wright was listed as number six.

Proceeds would benefit Gamers Give Back, which provides free videogame systems to sick kids. The next day, the bidding price was up to only \$25. Ji figured the auction was a flop.

DARIUS KAZEMI, a game designer from Boston, attended the Game Developers Conference but missed the Game Design Challenge. However, he saw people stream out of the session "all starry-eyed, talking about this awesome game that Jason had made," and when he saw the charity auction page, along with the detailed list of future slots on chainworld.org, he began "quaking with rage," he says. The fact that an intriguing piece of art had been instantly commoditized and locked behind a pay gate was too much to bear. "It was kind of like an aesthetic assassination," he says.

Kazemi decided to submit his own bid for the stick, not so he could play *Chain World* but so he could "release the game back to the wild." He also wrote a seething comment on chainworld.org, which he reposted on his own blog, effectively sounding the alarm in art-game circles. Soon Ji and McGonigal were getting slammed with negative emails and tweets. One commenter wished that the recent tsunami "had just killed Jia Ji and

washed the flash drive to someone who would follow the rules." (McGonigal defended herself against a critic on Twitter: "You are seriously upset about raising money for sick kids? Good grief." Wright tells WIRED he doesn't remember being asked to play.) Even the creator chimed in. "Im in ur temple flippin ur tables," Rohrer tweeted, invoking Jesus' fury with the money changers, adding pointedly, "Whoever wins *Chain World* auction should NOT mail USB stick on to [McGonigal]."

As the rhetorical temperature rose, so did the price of the memory stick. Frantic, Kazemi asked his friends for donations to keep up with the bidding, eventually raising \$875 from 15 people, but it wasn't nearly enough. The winner was an anonymous entity calling itself Positional Super Ko, a reference to a rule in the board game Go. For the right to play a used videogame exactly once, Positional Super Ko agreed to pay \$3,300.

As the *Chain World* schism blossomed, spawning hundreds of tweets, it was possible to identify several things that Rohrer's

simple creation was revealing about games, religion, and human behavior:

1. Nothing. It's performance art.

Rohrer and Ji were in cahoots, playing predetermined roles. "Nope," Rohrer emails, adding, "Mr. Jia Ji is a force of Nature, a phenomenon, and I don't mean that in a good way."

2. Religion is dumb. "My favorite thing about this," Frank Lantz, creative director of Zynga New York, wrote on a listserv, "is that it reflects the deep sickness unto death that is religion, a lethal blend of megalomaniacal solipsism, paranoid-schizophrenia, platonic idealism, banal pyramid schemes, authentic grassroots collectivism, and good old-fashioned resentment."

3. A religion is more than its sacred text.

"This was totally not something I would have wanted to happen at all," Rohrer says. "On the other hand, it's interesting that [Ji] would take something that I had done and irritate me with it." If religion is about customs and rituals, not sacred text, Ji was a gift to

Chain World, enriching it beyond the means of its creator.

4. Rohrer and other art-gamers take themselves way too seriously.

Ji was doing gaming a service by puncturing the pretentiousness of an insular community.

5. Rohrer is a genius.

The rules that Rohrer encoded in *Chain World* were so clever that "even something that appears to be a perversion of the designer's intent only serves to reinforce the metaphor," Gamasutra's Alexander says. To put it another way: Rohrer made a game about how religion is really these stories you tell about the past. Now people weren't just creating unpredictable stories within the game, they were building new myths *around* this game. "It almost took on its own form," videogame theorist Ian Bogost says. "It's both horrifying and beautiful."

6. Rohrer is God.

Some of Rohrer's favorite works of art—the novel *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov, the movie *Memento* by Christopher Nolan—feature unreliable narrators. It's

hard to escape the feeling, however absurd, that with *Chain World*, the artist had conjured up his own unreliable narrator, that Jia Ji was, in some sense, a creation of the game.

IN LATE SPRING, with Rohrer's bank account running low and his family struggling to get by on sales of his games about death and consciousness and infinity, he considered building an online version of *Chain World* and charging people to play. A lucrative Chain World Reformation. "I was kind of getting dollar signs in my eyes," he says, adding, "like any decent religion founder would."

Meanwhile, the story of *Chain World* was about to take another strange twist. On Twitter, the anonymous winner of the eBay auction had been posting cryptic Go-related koans about preventing "uninteresting stalemates." In an online chat with WIRED, Positional Super Ko revealed only that she is a woman living in a major US city,

and that her goal was "to restore a sense of mystery to the whole thing." She wouldn't say whether she planned to send the stick to Jane McGonigal after she was done playing.

Super Ko seemed to be embracing Rohrer's original vision for the game and rejecting Ji's—and, surprisingly, Ji also seemed to want to restore a sense of mystery to *Chain World*. "It's literally a burden to have this thing, which I think is true of a lot of holy artifacts," he said in early April while still in Hawaii. "I want to get rid of it."

He promised to send \$1,000 of Super Ko's \$3,300 check to fund Gamers Give Back and was reserving the rest for tsunami relief and Hawaiian causes. And in May, Ji emailed, "Auction winner now has the original flash drive." But he also included links to three videos. In the first video, he was scampering up a massive banyan tree in the Pele Aina Faery Sanctuary, a hippie community in the jungle. Ji looked healthy and limber and wore a necklace of lava rock with a flash-drive pendant. In the second clip, he was handing the drive

to a silent, bare-chested man holding a tall wooden staff; Ji addressed him as "Temple Guardian." The third showed Ji at a lookout point atop the Kilauea volcano, lava vents belching smoke behind him. "The thing has caused me a lot of grief," he said, holding a drive up to the camera. It had a brushed-metal texture and was painted with a chain of dots. "I'm pretty sure I can get this into the lava," Ji said. Smiling, he counted to three and seemed to fling it in a high arc over the ledge.

Rohrer has watched the clip, and he believes that Ji only pretended to throw the drive. "I think that each of these videos is just a staged bit to serve as misdirection about where *Chain World* actually is," Rohrer says. His tone is one of bemused, distanced curiosity, not concern. Ultimately, he has decided against building an online version of the game; time is limited, and there are other, newer worlds to create. "Watching those videos reminds me of why I don't live in a commune," he says. "But Hawaii looks like a pretty nice place."