



## **MeiGeist Placement and Research Report**

This document contains two reports relating to MeiGeist, an ARG which was produced following Hazel Grian's Diffraction placement in HP Labs, Bristol.

The first was compiled by Watershed and covers feedback and observations around the success of the placement.

The second was written by Hazel Grian, Jonathan Williams and Kenton O'Hara and summarises feedback and learning around the production of the game.



**WATERSHED**

## **Diffraction | HP Labs, Bristol**

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## **Part One : Diffraction Placement: Report and feedback**

**Artist: Hazel Grian**

**Host: HP Labs, Bristol**

**Manager: Watershed, Bristol**

**Date: July – December 2006**

### **Background**

Diffraction, the pilot title of Arts Council England Interact programme, offered placements to already established artists in innovative research and industry contexts for up to 9 months between the end of 2005 and the end of 2007. Aiming to unlock artists' professional potential and demonstrate their vital contribution to the social, cultural and economic landscape, the placements offered inspiration and support to participants to continue to produce work that is challenging and innovative. A sum of £10,000 was allocated to each placement by Arts Council South West, with additional funds available for advertising, recruitment, project management, mentoring and documentation.

The Bristol placement was advertised in The Guardian by Arts Council England and through Watershed contacts, networks and newsletters. 25 applications were received and six applicants interviewed. The interviews took place in HP Labs, Bristol on 11 April 2006 and the panel consisted of Clare Reddington, Watershed, Nema El-Nahas of Arts Council South West, John Hartley, Arts Council and Kenton O'Hara of HP Labs. Initially Jago Eliot was appointed to the placement, who sadly passed away on 15 April. Hazel Grian, who had also scored highly and impressed the panel, was then appointed.

An agreement was drawn up between the three parties, stating their responsibilities, rights and the aim of the placement.

Further information about the placement, including Hazel's journal, can be found at <http://www.dshed.net/studio/projects/diffraction/placement.html>

### **Overview**

"Bringing together the arts, technology and social sciences has given us an opportunity to explore how emerging and online and mobile communication technologies can be used to create engaging new experiences with the technologies outside their original purpose. The work has been inspirational and thought provoking for us and its influence will extend further than the current project." Kenton O'Hara, HP Labs

In 2006, Hazel Grian spent six months in HP Labs in Bristol in the Mobile and Media Systems Lab. With an open brief to collaborate with Labs researchers around video on mobile devices, Hazel focussed on the narrative possibilities of Alternative Reality Games, which use interactive narrative across many different platforms using multiple media and game elements, to tell a story that may be affected by participants' ideas or actions.

"I really wanted a chance to work side by side with technologists. The outcome was great, I was inspired by their application of forward-looking ideas into actual technology. They seemed to welcome my input of creative ideas from an outsider's viewpoint." Hazel Grian, Licorice Films

During the latter stages of the placement, it was clear to Watershed that Hazel had developed an idea with much currency and that enabling it to progress would have significant benefit to all parties. Watershed Project Manager Clare Reddington had developed a close relationship with Hazel and was keen to invest time and money in further support "We were all convinced by Hazel's research and her ability to develop a high quality, original and innovative project. We were therefore keen to offer extra support and contributed £1,000 in development money to cash-flow the transition between the research and production phases." Watershed also continued to provide advocacy and advice in securing the additional funding needed and encouraged Hazel to use Watershed as a base for the game's production, securing a deal with the UWE's incubator space to split the costs associated with this. Finally Watershed levered much-needed support from TLT Solicitors, offering support over IP and patent law at a crucial point in the game's development.

In January 2007, Hazel moved into Watershed and launched MeiGeist, an Alternative Reality Game created from the research undertaken as part of the residency. Blending fiction with reality by telling its story across different media including websites, text message, live events and email, 30,000 people around the world took part in the game which lasted eight weeks. Hazel (described by The Simpson's creator Matt Groening as 'a funny filmmaking genius') describes the concept:

"Playing Meigeist means you follow a really entertaining story with great characters, very much set in the real world with a few sci-fi additions. You won't have to pretend you're a wizard or open a virtual bank account in somewhere called Zordax or anything. There's loads of separate bits of video, puzzles and websites you can enjoy but of course it's a lot more satisfying if you do the detective work and discover the whole story from beginning to end. What you will be able to do with Meigeist is have a go without fear of it being totally beyond you and you'll really feel you're part of something cool."

Referred to as 'the funniest game of all time!' and "the ARG event of the year!", reviews by players of the game are available at the ARG forum. A player-created wiki documented the story as it unfolded at [www.meigeist.com](http://www.meigeist.com).

Since completing the placement and game, Hazel has started talks with two major ARG producers around supplying content and storylines for them in the future.

## **Funding**

In addition to the funding awarded as part of the Diffraction placement, MeiGeist was financially supported from several sources:

### **Placement: July – December 2006**

Funding: £10,000 Arts Council England

Additional support:

£2,500 HP Labs (plus in kind support of office space, mentoring, equipment)

£2,500 University of West of England

### **Game production: January – April 2007**

Funding: £8,000 Arts Council England, £2,000 Watershed (plus £1,000 in kind support through office space and in kind support for live event)

Additional support: £7,500 Arts and Humanities Research Council

£1,000 University of West of England (plus £1,000 in kind support through office space in UWE incubator)

£4,000 South West Screen (project completion funding).

MeiGeist was completed on a budget of £37,000 and reached a global audience of around 30,000.

## **Hazel Grian: Experiences and observations, 28 March 2007**

### **First impressions**

Hazel started by settling in to the work space allocated to her within the MMS Lab environment and working out a six-month project schedule. Finding her new colleagues to be both professional and welcoming, her first task was to get used to a desktop PC alongside her normal Mac laptop.

Hazel describes having 'various things to learn about being part of a large corporate workforce'. Having never worked in an office before she was curious about the working life of a 'corporate nine to five'. Finding herself to 'fit in easily' encouraged Hazel to extend the required two day week to five days at HP as the project work load increased. The office environment could sometimes seem restrictive however, 'I would often use the library there and would move around the building with my lap top as sometimes I found it hard to be inspired sitting at a desk' and by the end of the six months she 'was glad to be able to return to my own freedoms away from repetitive office life'.

### **Additional capacity**

It soon became apparent to Hazel that there would not be the sort of technical support available in labs that she had expected. The Alternate Reality Game (ARG) project was also much more complex than she had originally foreseen.

Hazel therefore took on graduate Jonathan Williams as part of the UWE Graduate Placement Scheme. At the end of September Lab Manager Phil Stenton secured further support by funding Jon's position for an additional three months, which meant by October a detailed eight-episode story structure for the ARG was in place.

### **Collaboration**

Hazel spent some time exploring the technologies and research projects being developed by HP Labs in other departments, but was ultimately unable to incorporate them into the game due to the fact that technology in development is often restricted to specific platforms and because of budgetary considerations: "I was particularly interested in the Active Print bar codes and in Media Scapes and wanted to involve this research in the interactive elements of my game. I hoped that this would give the players a new experience and draw attention to fresh new ways in which MMSL research could be applied creatively. However this never came into fruition mostly due to the restrictive nature of the technology."

Hazel highlights this as an area where future funding could be targeted.

### **Post Placement**

During the last three months of the placement, Hazel shot and edited the video footage for her ARG, of which there were about 50 clips, and wrote as much of the fictional blogs and other texts as she could do in advance. She also used this time to secure additional funding to enable the game to move into production after the completion of the placement. This was secured from various sources including Arts Council England, South West Screen, University West of England and Watershed.

### **Lasting Impact**

*MeiGeist*, the first ever publicly funded ARG, was an enormous success both with the critics and players. The experience of being resident in HP Labs will continue to influence Hazel's work: "I think it is very pertinent to give creative practitioners the chance to make headway with industrial developers and likewise for smart industry people to see the benefit of having a creative person around. Of course it is up to the individual to make of it what they will but for most practitioners I would say that working with new technology and new means of distribution is essential. I feel I gained an awful lot from this experience. Being given the opportunity to practise one's craft and reach an audience is invaluable."

The project also gave Hazel an opportunity to develop and showcase her talent in areas where skills often go unnoticed: concept, design, writing, improvisation and role-playing. The multi-media multi-platform nature of ARGs legitimises the multi-talented role of "Puppet Master", and it was precisely Hazel's diverse artistic and aesthetic strengths that made the game a success.

In terms of Hazel's professional capacity and ambition, the placement has increased her confidence "that I am going in the right direction towards achieving my goal of making a living as an original creative individual with a good professional reputation... the project has made it clear that I can be engaged professionally as a director or a storyteller both in traditional fields and in 'new media'. New roles are coming out of this new form of entertainment; I feel I am now at the forefront of an exciting new form".

What it has also highlighted though, is the tension between being able to spend enough time working creatively, whilst also doing the job of selling herself and her projects. In order to capitalise on the opportunities now presenting themselves, Hazel acknowledges a requirement for ongoing support, both as an individual practitioner and as a Creative Business Director. To develop Licorice Films, Hazel must find herself a producer/manager to work in partnership with, and find studio/office space to enable the business to meet the growing commercial appetite for her work.

Since completing the placement and game, Hazel has been recruited as a writer for Kate Modern, a new interactive drama from the makers of lonelygirl15, which recently launched on Bebo. She was also commissioned to create an mScape for HP labs, featuring characters from MeiGeist and has agreed a further £50,000 project with HP Labs.

### **HP Labs Bristol. Kenton O Hara, HP Labs: Experiences and observations, March 2007**

The MMS lab in HP has some experience in working with artists, seeing content design as a key part of technology design innovation. However, the Diffraction placement offered an opportunity to work with an artist in a much closer and immersed way.

At a high level, HP Labs participated in the placement to get a new perspective on mobile video and to explore whether the placement's freedom would have some effect on their researchers' approach. It was quickly identified by the company that a key challenge would be balancing the freedom of the artist while also trying to maintain some sense of relevance to the company.

Kenton was involved in the selection and interview process for the artist, recognising that the success of the placement would depend in part on the person being placed. It was clear to him from early on that Hazel's motivation and direction would enable trust to be built quickly – "There was a sense that something of quality would be produced, even during the periods early in the research phase on where there was nothing tangible to see".

Hazel was willing to engage with people from other parts of HP and was very open to collaboration. She engaged with the Active Print and Mobile Bristol projects but made appropriate judgments not to include them in the game: "I think these were good decisions in the end because it made the game very accessible to a wider audience than would have been possible with prototype technologies incorporated. What this did was make a much more interesting platform for doing social science research with because it is actual people and communities voluntarily playing this game - I think we need more of this kind of user experience work to compliment those experiments where we are only able to put prototypes in front of a limited audience for a few hours".

#### **Lessons learnt**

Kenton felt that there had not been a clear sense of who the artist was accountable to - Arts Council, Watershed or to the host organisation? A clearer sense of reporting and expected outcomes could have helped to further manage the expectations of all parties.

Kenton had taken on the role of nominated contact within HP Labs and sees this as an important component of a placement "I think having an interested party in the host organisation who champions the relevance of the work and helps with navigating the organisation can also be useful. I think in the main having trust and respect on both sides is what allows the placements to work for both sides".

#### **Legacy**

The game provided HP Labs with a platform for exploring pervasive experiences in the real world, a new avenue of research which will continue through HP Labs subsequent commission of Hazel to continue her research around Alternative Reality Gaming.

#### **Watershed Conclusions**

The Watershed/HP Labs partnership began in 1999 when both organisations became founding members of the Bristol Creative Technology Network. With Mobile Bristol, a programme founded by HP, Watershed has acted as a research partner, sharing an interest in exploring user experiences of digital media beyond the confines of the cinema or gallery. In 2004 Watershed partnered with HP to create the SE3D animation showcase, a project which enabled 3D animators access to an experimental Utility Rendering Service. As well as offering a multi-user industry test for this cutting-edge research, the SE3D project delivered significant media coverage for both partners and, with Watershed acting as broker, provided HP with a public interface, profile in the media industry and introductions to artists, producers and cultural providers in

the city and beyond.

The Diffraction placement offered another opportunity to deepen and strengthen this partnership, with multiple outcomes benefiting all parties: the placement gave Hazel, an artist who Watershed has a long relationship with, access to cutting-edge research around emerging technologies, contact with researchers for potential collaboration on future projects and promotion and exposure as part of a larger scheme. HP Labs had the opportunity to explore potential uses for its technologies outside their original purpose and explore how someone from a different viewpoint might apply their research and technological solutions, and the placement offered Watershed new knowledge and capability around mobile media and gaming, and an opportunity to explore and further refine its research into models and processes of collaboration.

Watershed has recently launched iShed, a new venture to initiate, enable and support cross-sector collaborations and creative technology projects. iShed will seek to deliberately push technology to its limits, giving SMEs, artists and researchers the freedom to experiment and subvert, demanding few 'hard' outputs in the early stages of a project's development but investing in the people, networks and relationships that will continue to contribute and collaborate for years to come.

The success and learning around Hazel's placement has been key in the development of the iShed proposition. Small amounts of financial support, coupled with mentoring and in-kind resources has yielded significant creative and commercial benefit and the placement will continue to be used by Watershed and iShed as a key case study as this area of work evolves.

In conclusion, some of the learnings and questions arising from the placement are summarised below:

Before the placement:

- Manage expectations - Each partner may have different objectives for getting involved, both individually and with regards to the research. Partners need to be aware of all of the desired outcomes for the collaboration and responsibilities and expectations should be made clear from the outset (initial misunderstanding around the availability of technical expertise from HP Labs could have resulted in failed placement).
- Placements seem to work best where there is an internal point of contact/advocate to broker trust, familiarise the artists with the setting and culture of the organisation and to make sure they fit in
- Questions surrounding Intellectual Property Rights should be agreed at the beginning of the partnership
- How to credit the role played by each of the collaborators in the end product should also be addressed from the beginning.

During the Placement

- Collaborating partners should be prepared to embrace and exploit unexpected results
- Knowledge networks and new contacts are as vital to the health of the collaboration as cash funding and a valuable resource for knowledge transfer, promotion and dissemination.
- It is vital to stage regular meetings with all partners, to keep the channels of communication open and to enable new ideas/directions to be considered and exploited.

General:

- Funding for a 'blue skies' placement should be flexible and contain contingency as open, collaborative projects will inevitably grow
- Evaluating placements of this nature is tricky. Whilst active collaboration around mobile media did not in this case occur, new ways of thinking were engendered and it is likely the placement will continue to have significant impact on all parties long after the official project period.

The role of Arts Council (South West and England) must be highlighted as key to the success of this and future placements, as without the involvement of a nationally recognised institution, the projects would have struggled. The profile and position of Arts Council offers a legitimacy to the placements that Watershed alone could not bring, which is vital when making initial contact with potential industry hosts (who may not have worked in this sector before) and is of significant influence when recruiting the artist. In addition, Arts

Council infrastructure afforded PR and advertising opportunities that would not otherwise have been available, and advocacy and support through the network of artists and hosts participating in the scheme.

Post placement, Arts Council's initial investment in an open-ended and innovative research project continues to have legacy beyond its initial aims. The inter-agency support MeiGeist received (Arts Council South West, South West Screen, AHRC and UWE) catalysed a shared interest across funding bodies in the South West, contributing to the South West Regional Development Agencies identification of Pervasive Media within its ongoing funding priorities.

Schemes like Interact offer a continued strategic engagement with emerging artistic practise around digital media, computing and communications, resulting in new skills and capacity, more challenging creative practice and a more networked and competitive creative economy.

**Part Two: *MeiGeist* Alternate Reality Game**  
**Created by Hazel Grian and Jonathan Williams**  
**Report by Hazel Grian, Kenton O'Hara (HP-Labs) & Jonathan Williams**  
**April 2007**

*'The funniest game of all time'* Jonathan Waits ARG Network

*'The ARG spectacle of the year'* Jacky Kerr ARG Network

*'I can't thank the makers of MeiGeist enough. Helped me more than anyone can know.'* Karl Smith, ARG player.

### **Introduction**

The Alternate Reality Game which became known as MeiGeist was first conceived by filmmaker Hazel Grian as an 'interactive narrative' at the beginning of 2006. After ten months of full-time development work by Hazel (trading as Licorice Film Ltd based in Bristol) and UWE Media Graduate Jonathan Williams it completed its run in March 2007 as one of the most successful ARGs in the history of the genre.

MeiGeist is a science-fiction story set in the present day in which the audience plays a key role. The story connects with the audience or 'players' through several media, the players connect with each other and work as a worldwide group using the on-line ARG Network forums.

This report puts MeiGeist, the first publicly funded example of a form normally associated with commercially commissioned viral marketing, into context as a successful addition to a new art form. The experiences of both the creators and the audience are taken into consideration and are illustrated with examples from the game text itself. This is followed by a description of the ways in which the producers actively encouraged creativity amongst the audience. A summary of the findings collected from user-data help to give an overview of the audience demographic and leads us to consider the future possibilities of interactive gaming both as a publicly funded venture and as a commercially valuable marketing tool.

### **Why an Alternate Reality Game?**

ARGs have two main benefits for contemporary creative practitioners. They are conducive to multi-media, multi-contextual expression whilst also having a commercial application. For the practitioner, this commercial application means not only a source of funding but also a means of distribution to a wide audience. The source of funding for creative content production is an increasingly pertinent issue, as is reflected by both Arts Council and South West Screen's nurturing of partnerships with creative practitioners and industrial developers.

The ARG as a genre has its origins in viral marketing. In the early 2000s advertisers sought new ways of reaching an increasingly jaded target audience and began to exploit the power word-of-mouth and peer-to-peer recommendations. Commissioners of ARGs tend to be in the fields of innovative entertainment themselves; they understand the nature and benefits of viral marketing. The first recognised ARG, 'The Beast' turned out to be a very subtle marketing campaign for the Spielberg movie 'AI' and other prominent ARGs have been campaigns for music albums, Playstation games and Microsoft Vista.

We see therefore that MeiGeist, as the first ever publicly funded ARG, has unusually taken a form of innovative advertising and turned it into a piece of work for its own sake. An interesting question here is whether there are any real differences between the commercially funded and the publicly funded ARG. From the creative practitioner's point of view, public funding for MeiGeist gave the makers a free hand in the content and time-scale of the project. MeiGeist reached a wide audience and the feedback shows they considered it to be a highly successful additional to the genre. This is very good news for those who supported the game financially. From a practitioner's point of view it is obviously also very satisfying. However despite the great critical success of MeiGeist the producers have been left without anything to show financially for what was in effect a twelve-month project with global impact. Having said that, there is

a postscript – the increased reputation gained from the game’s success has drawn in valuable commercial work for the producers.

### **MeiGeist Narrative – Actively Encouraging Collaborative Audience Interaction**

Over an eight-week period the players act as on-line Sci-Fi detectives uncovering clues and solving puzzles in order to aid the story’s main character, a 20year old Bristol student named Eva McGill, to whom they have become very attached. As well as collaborative problem solving, Meigeist also deliberately encouraged active play, creative production and public display. The important proactive role of the on-line ARG community is reflected in the use of the term ‘players’ rather than the passive ‘audience’. It should also be noted here that ARG producers are always referred to as ‘puppet masters or PMs’. This is used with terms such as ‘behind the curtain’ and reflects the atmosphere of mystery and play expected in the relationship between producers and players.

MeiGeist deliberately encouraged players to be proactive in new ways which involved looking not so exactly ‘behind the curtain’ but ‘outside’ the computer screen ‘at the bigger picture’ requiring them to be creative in their own right and to display their work collaboratively within the game. Specific opportunities were deliberately set-up in order to encourage the players to take their own photographs and make video clips along the theme of emotional memory.

- **Three minute Film Challenge** – the players were asked by game characters to collaboratively make a short film which would help the main character Eva wake from a coma and realise she had friends who cared for her. The players successfully produced two clips by delegating tasks for collecting and editing clips and stills from the rest of the game and by producing their own original visual and audio clips. These were edited by a delegated player and posted on the forum. Following a vote the players then submitted their chosen collectively produced video during a live chat with the characters on-line. The film was then seen to have a very positive effect on Eva.
- **Posting Personal Photographs** – the players were encouraged by the game characters to submit their photographs to two different web sites. Most prominently they were able to use their mobile phones to send their photographs to an uplink page where the photos would appear automatically. Players were also encouraged to email photos to Eva’s blog gallery. Again they were deliberately encouraged to be personal and emotional – players were asked to send photos of themselves with cats, which looked like Eva’s lost cat, or of themselves putting up Eva’s lost cat poster (sent in the mail to them in both UK and USA). Players began to improvise and have fun sending in pictures of other things they thought interesting. One player, Charlie a 25 year old in the US made his own video for Eva’s blog, involving his own cat with his voice over giving friendly advice to Eva.

This approach seems to have successfully given the players a sense of fun and involvement in the game which they have not experienced elsewhere:

*“The PMs put a lot of thought into creating an environment where the players would work together. And they did ☺” Tarim aged 47, UK.*

*“The requesting of the ‘video sequence’ was a master stroke as it got the players to work together to create something that we all had an opinion about and genuinely believed would effect the outcome of the next stage of the game. PLEASE do another one, a huge thanks to all involved for creating an excellent game that captured the imagination of so many over 2-3 months of our lives ☺” Barry 32, UK*

*“ MeiGeist was an incredible experience. The level of true interaction between pms, actors and players was over and above what I’ve seen from other games. I particularly appreciate efforts to include those of us in the US in the live event experience with the chats.” Michelle 30 USA*

*“ARG rookies not quite feeling ambitious enough to take on the larger tasks could get themselves involved through Eva’s blog where a simple comment or e-mailed picture could help effect Eva’s actions just enough*

*to help the player feel as though he or she had participated in the game and made a difference. It was executed brilliantly.” Ian aged 15 Canada*

*“MeiGeist is special because of the level of effort that goes into making the game a special experience for everyone involved. The live online chats, the live event in Bristol, the eBay auction and (ofcourse0 all the totally personalised email was very unique and really made this ARG great. I can’t stress enough how awesome it was to be receiving email that was not generic but rather written personally and uniquely.” Charlie aged 15, USA.*

*“A very personalised experience that managed to captivate rather than isolate the players. The most impressive part that set it apart was the clear expression of respect and love that we as players received from the PM. Usually and ARG ignores the players and treats them as sort of an anonymous collective – but here we actually had the opportunity to make friends with the characters and hold interesting conversations that weren’t even game related. It gave us a very real sense that what we were doing was effecting the outcome of the story and that is the ultimate holy grail of interactive gaming.” Jonathan 24, UK.*

*“The emphasis on the collaborative element made it truly engaging, something to participate in as a team rather than just follow individually” Tom aged 30 UK.*

*“I found the amount of player involvement and the push for them to act together as a community was exceptional.” Jackie Kerr ARG Network editor aged 27 USA.*

### **Coordination and Collaboration in an Alternate Reality Game**

Since the launch of the Beast in 2001, Alternate Reality Games have emerged as a significant form of pervasive gaming and interactive storytelling. These games combine narrative elements of a story that are built up and presented to players across a whole range of on-line and offline media. Web sites, blogs, SMS messaging; web cams, podcasts, phone calls, emails, letters, posters and live interactions with characters are among the many different ways existing ARGs have used to present and allow players to interact with particular narrative elements.

In contrast to some other mixed reality and pervasive experiences, many ARGs are played out over a long period of time, of the order of weeks, months and even years. This is significant for a number of reasons: first, because it allows a specific player community to be built up over a period of time; and second, because the significant time investment required to participate in the game and the need to manage this commitment within the context of other everyday activities demanding player attention.

### **Delegating, Distribution and Location**

One of the key components of the game was a “live event” in which a part of the game was played out in the real world rather than through the myriad of digital media that made up the vast majority of the game. For this event, players had figured out from the puzzles that they needed to convene in Bristol, UK to meet up with Pat and Dave, two key characters in the game. The intention of meeting up was to help Eva (the central character in the game) who they had figured out would be in the Watershed in Bristol on that particular date.

The prospect of a live event generated a considerable buzz among the core players in the forum. The prospect of meeting the characters they had engaged with over the past few weeks was an exciting way for them to participate in the ongoing narrative of the game. It also provided an opportunity to meet some like-minded players with who they had been interacting in the forums during the course of the game. Finally it was an opportunity for them to advance the game by collecting further information and clues about what was going on.

The live event though poses a considerable challenge to participation in this particular aspect of the game. Being physically located in Bristol, UK, there are inevitable difficulties of access for a large proportion of the players, in particular for those players based in the US. Likewise, there is a large time commitment involved and at a fixed time that also presents pragmatic constraints for fitting this game within other commitments in players lives. Eight players eventually turn up to participate in the live event, some of which were local and others who travelled up to 100 miles to take part. What is of interest to us here though is the ways that the community as a whole dealt with and worked around these constraints to maintain a sense of participation and also to maintain a demonstrable commitment to the group.

Another way the community organised themselves in response to the inability to attend the live event was through the establishment of on-line support duties for the live event players. In the forum prior to the live event, there were explicit requests from those attending for non-attendees to be on-line. There were also several offers to take up this role from the online players offering to be on the forums, chat room and also on the phone if necessary to offer real time support to the live eventers. These offers of help again contribute towards the group goal through a pragmatic division of labour. Through volunteering online players are demonstrating their commitment to the group and again we see we see similar kinds of accountability and explanation occurring in regards to the players' ability or inability to act in this role.

Documentation was another way that the live eventers were able to extend some of the experience back to the online players. Numerous postings just prior to the live event made explicit requests for people to make recordings of the event for them using camcorders and digital cameras. And as we saw earlier quotes in the paper, players such as Thunderwolf expressed their intentions to record the event with a camcorder. Following the event, these video recordings (approximately 30 minutes each) were posted to You Tube with considerable encouragement from the online players who were eager to see the footage. Other players at the event posted photographs of key characters, players and places in the live event. A number of live eventers also created textual summaries of the event helping to further the story.

### **Making Collective Participation visible**

One of the key aspects of this and other ARGs is active player participation in the game and in particular with key characters in the game through the in-game media elements. In MeiGeist there were numerous ways that the player community would engage in these participatory activities. For example, players would post comments on Eva's blog, they would email the characters, send photos and videos to characters and upload them to particular in-game web sites, have phone conversations with in-game characters, participate in in-game forums, register on in-game web sites and enter in-game chat rooms to chat live to particular characters.

First of all, through these participatory contributions, the player community are essentially co-creators of the media elements that make up the essential building blocks of the game. That is not to bestow on them the same status as the puppet masters – who are essentially responsible to the creation and flow of the game's narrative. The player contributions nevertheless give a greater level of richness to the media components of the game that can be an engaging read in themselves for the other players and contribute to their understanding of the narrative. Players also use these participatory opportunities as a way of advancing the narrative of the story and as a way of advancing their understanding of the underlying story. Most obvious here is the direct questioning of the characters about other in game characters and events. Through the answers that are given the players are able make explicit the links between different sections of the narrative and how these sections interplay. But there are more subtle ways that these player-character interactions collectively advance the narrative. That is, the interactions between the players and the characters are part of the means by which disparate parts of the narrative come together. So by revealing information or through offering supposition on the basis of other parts of the game, the players reveal information to the characters that they would otherwise be unaware of at that particular point in time. An example of this can be seen in the following comment posted by a player on Eva's blog:

"Eva,

*Try not to worry. I know that's easier to say than do. Not only have we seen the robobug that Myrtle mentions above but also a shadow of what looked like Voiphe running across the room. I know this sounds crazy but it's true. I do not wish to alarm you in any way as I feel you have strength you do not yet know you have and can over come any situation. But we also got an alarming video yesterday as well. It looks like someone is spying on you. Who or why we do not know yet. But we are working hard to find out. Just to prove to you that you are being watched and so that you don't do any thing you wouldn't want someone else to see go to your home page:*

*<http://www.evamcgill.co.uk/>*

*You will see some new code in the upper left hand corner with a link to a video showing you straightening up around the couch and going over to your book self. It appears that who ever is watching you is doing so through your very own computer and camera. So someone has obviously hacked into your system. We will keep you informed of our findings.*

*It might be a good idea to get out and get some fresh air but I doubt you would be able to escape who ever is spying on you. I would suggest taking a friend with you and no not Keir. You don't know anything about him yet. Just make sure to stay in areas with lots of people.*

*Thinking of you Eva*

*Sylvia*

*Posted by Sylvia at Friday, February 09, 2007 04:22:07"*

This posting was among a series of communications to Eva about the character Keir Jones in which the players warn Eva to be cautious about meeting up with him because of things they have heard elsewhere in the game. In response to these communications, Eva's subsequent posting on her blog make reference to these communications reacting to the player submitted content.

*"Friday, February 16, 2007*

*It's a Date*

*Thank you all for caring and for your kind messages and words of advice - Sylvia, lollipop, Maddy, Myrtle, carmenmiranda, ChristaKaye - and all of you who have emailed. I haven't dared post here for a few days, I don't know what's going on. Anyway I thought I'd take the risk. I also felt a bit embarrassed because I know some of you thought I should stay away from Keir but I've taken another risk, I've arranged to meet him on my birthday (I won't say where and when here). I suppose it's a date. I'm sorry, my digital existence and my friendship with you has been everything these past few weeks but I just want to have a nice time and be with some one who can be actually be there in front of me, perhaps even to hold in my arms. Oh dear I've made myself cry now. What? Now my web cam won't work! I'm fed up of the electrics and technology round here, every time I need it, it goes on the blink. Then it films me when I'm not looking.*

*Be seeing you, I hope. Eva"*

Of significance in relation to these in-game player-character communications is how they come to be made visible to the rest of the player community. While some of the communications such as the in-game forums and blog comments are inherently visible to the other players, there are other channels that are private, e.g. personal emails to and from characters, phone calls, SMS messages and letters received. In the spirit of advancing the collective knowledge of the game, players chose to publish these communications on the relevant forum threads for the other players to see or listen to. Emails would be copied and pasted into the forum, letters would be scanned and the images posted to the forum, answer phone messages were recorded and posted, and phone calls précised and summarised on the forum.

In another episode, several players received a poster and a letter through the post. There were clear expressions of excitement that accompanied their postings on the forum but as more players posted about

their receipt of a letter and poster it became apparent that certain players wouldn't be receiving them and that it was just a select few who would. While all the players made the information available to the other players, there was clearly a sense of disappointment among those who had not received anything. Some of the forum postings around this time concerned themselves with expressions of disappointment but also attempts to understand why certain people had been chosen and why others hadn't – they were looking for some sort significance and reasons to dismiss explanations based on favouring particular players.

### **Mixing work and play time**

One of the most notable features of the community behaviour around this game was the level of organisation associated with it and the work put into maintaining this throughout the course of the game. As has been noted, this and other ARGs have a high level of complexity associated with them in terms of puzzles to solve, putting together clues from the disparate sources, keeping track of the various speculations about underlying issues driving the narrative. As the game progressed and more and more elements and complexity were added it was notable how the forum structure evolved to accommodate this. New threads were added for emerging discussion topics and by the end of the game the forum had been organised into 130 topics. Perhaps more notable in relation to this structuring of the forum space is the housework that the group did around this. For example as the discussion in particular threads drifted onto different areas, certain players would take the initiative to spin it off in to a new thread – moving certain postings and redirecting players with hyperlinks to the new thread for any subsequent posting on the topic. New threads would also be stopped if it were felt that the topic in question was covered elsewhere. Players posting information that had already been covered elsewhere would also be “trouted” and redirected to the original postings that covered the topics in question.

A small number of players also created various meta threads for the group as a way of adding further organising structure to the information in the game. These included *“MeiGeist: The Beginner's guide: What's the game all about?”*, *[WIKI] The geist wiki is at www.MeiGeist.com: The tracking wiki!*, *“[GEIST] Story So Far: concise account of events so far...”*, and *“Quick Links and Email: chat #geist”*. These particular threads were “stickied” in order to maintain their position at the top of the forum thread list and thereby making them easily accessible by all the players. In these threads and the constructed wiki, there is an introduction to the game, an evolving synopsis of the story, an overview of the key characters in the game and hyperlinks to the key in game web sites, blogs, email accounts and any necessary access passwords.

This documentation serves an important role in the experience that relate to the pragmatics of playing this and other ARGs. A good example here concerns the long timescale of the game and the fact that they are played out only once from a particular start date. For this reason, many players do not experience the game right from the beginning either through lack of awareness, practical constraints of getting involved, or through a deferred commitment to a game until it had received a sufficient stamp of credibility from other players on the ARG forums. Consequently as the game evolved momentum and credibility overtime, new players continued to join throughout its lifecycle. Joining the game in this way could be an arduous task given the complex and distributed nature of the game elements and characters and the vast amount of player supposition accompanying the story. These meta sites provide an easier way in for new players to join in the game without getting bogged down in the forum history. Given the importance of player participation for everyone experiencing the game (whether actively or passively), the addition of new players is helpful for the ongoing experience of the game. A second example concerns the practicalities of time management in relation to playing the game in the context of everyday life. Following and contributing to the forums, visiting the chat room, accessing the web sites, participating with the characters and solving the puzzles can potentially consume a vast amount of time for any player. Even for the most dedicated player this time has to be managed. In the forums we saw examples of postings where people had been away from the game for a few days and unable to contribute due to work and family commitments. For more casual players, too, they would experience the game by dipping in and out of it.

In summary, Meigeist is a rich source of potential socio-psychological study, which is of use to all those with an interest in developing both pervasive and immersive media.

## Data Collection

Player data was collected in several ways. This data is valuable in terms of its use for viral marketing and distribution and also as psycho/social study. The giving of personal details is a form of contract of trust between player and producer, the understanding being that the more personal information the player offers, the more interactivity with the game they will receive. MeiGeist collected data on 400 players:

- MeiGeist Sign-up form – name, address, email, phone numbers.
- Sphere Research Institute (Eva's fictional college) student enrolment test – in the form of a spoof psychological questionnaire – contact details, marital status, personal/political interests and opinions, reading habits and state of mind.
- End of game feedback form (see below)
- Website activity statistics (see below)

## End of Game Feedback

All players were invited to fill in a feedback form which was located on a website at the end of the game's run. The questions asked were those that would give an indication of the players location, gender, age, personal experience of the game, how much time they spent on it and if they would be prepared to pay for a game in future. Many of the thirty responders gave fully developed answers over several pages. Here is a typical example of one of the shorter ones:

*"Hello! Thanks for coming along with us all this way – it's been so much fun! Now we'd really like to get your feedback on MeiGeist and we'd appreciate it if you could take a little time to fill in this questionnaire. This will help us to find out what we did right and wrong and allow us to write up the whole journey. Of course everything you say will be in confidence and we may get in touch with you to speak to you personally. If our report includes your views and a little bit about you it'll help us raise the money to do more! Thanks for your help! Yours, Licorice film."*

**Name:** Sylvia Fee

**Age:** 45

**Email:** (given)

**Location:** London, KY, USA.

### **How did you first find out about MeiGeist?**

Through news and rumors at unfiction forums.

### **In your own words, describe your experience of playing MeiGeist**

For me this was the best ARG I've played so far. I really enjoyed it. Toward the end it got a little confusing due to a few too many way out there specs (*by the players on the forum*) but I quickly got over that. The pace of the game was just right, not too fast, not too slow. Things were well balanced to satisfy a variety of puzzle solvers and for those who just enjoy a good interactive story, Geist was just what the doctor ordered.

### **Have you played an ARG before? If so, what games have you played? If not what made you start?**

Yes. I played "Chasing the Wish 2," "Ny Takma," "Free! Psychic Readings," "Sammeeeees," and "Enoch of Gatewood."

### **When did you play the game, how often and for how long?**

I played everyday except at the end when I had to take care of some real life issues that I had put on hold. If I could have put them off any longer I would not have missed even those days.

**How does MeiGeist differ from other ARGs?**

For me I was able to enjoy the game without having to do tons of research about stuff I might not be interested in. It set a pace that made it easy to follow and it stayed on track. The story itself was enough to keep me turning the pages.

**Would you consider paying to play an ARG? If so, how much? Please give your reasons.**

: I'm not sure. I had a bad experience with a pay to play. However, Geist would have been worth paying for. But I would also hate to miss out on a good game just because I was broke at the time it started. I would probably prefer an in game way of donating so that those who can will and those who can't won't feel left out. Also a donation at end game would also be OK.

**What kind of games do you like to play?**

Mysteries. I hate games based on chats and I've seen enough mythology stuff to last me a life time. Geist was like a breath of fresh air.

**Any other comments?**

Just WOW. Thanks for the experience.

**Meigeist Feedback: Demographic Summary**

The 30 players who responded show a wide ranging demographic:

**Gender:** 56% male, 41% female, 3% unknown.

**Age:** 37% aged 30-38, 28.5% aged 20-27, 27% aged 40-47, 7.5% aged 15-19

**Country:** 47% USA, 44% UK, 6% Canada, and 3% Germany.

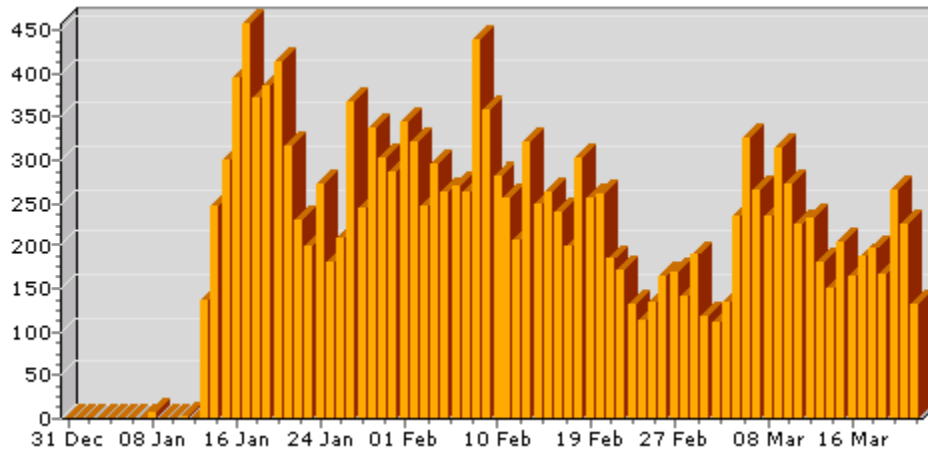
Whilst these figures represent only those types of players who were willing and able to fill in the form, they do indicate a demographic that is contrary to popular assumptions concerning on-line gamers i.e. that the gender split, rather than being dominated by males, is more or less equal female to male.

Secondly a surprising find is the dominant age range which reflects a sizeable presence of players in their thirties and late forties, again contrary to the accepted stereotype of the player being strictly in teenage or early twenties. The older age range for ARGs is possibly due to narrative and problem solving, which doesn't require any new skill sets or knowledge to play it, as say a video game would. Also it has no specialist platform since it exists using existing familiar platforms, people can play it while at they are doing other things such as at work in the office or whilst caring for children at home.

### Meigeist Web Site Statistics

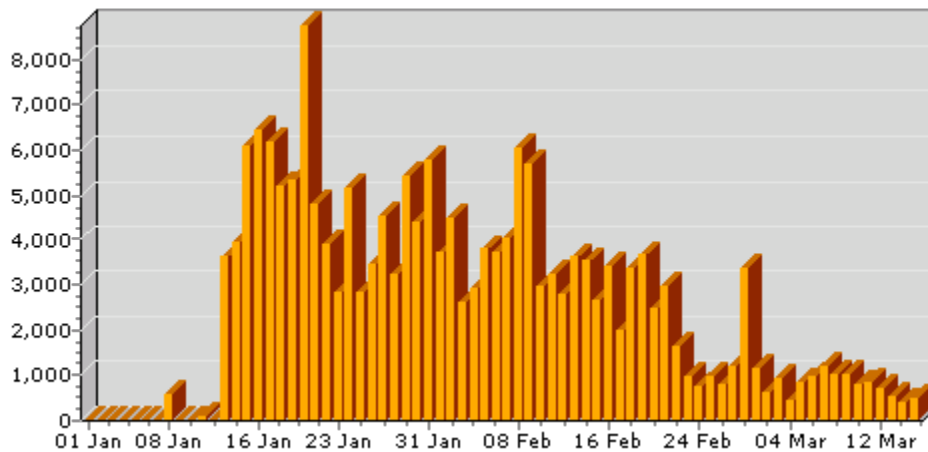
Each of the ten web sites developed as a part of MeiGeist reveal their own set of statistics, giving accurate figures of all visitor activity. The statistics show 30,000 separate IP addresses overall. i.e. the number of individual computers that logged on to Meigeist in-game websites. There is also accurate information about the location of each visitor worldwide and the proportions of different browsers used:

EvaMcgill.co.uk Unique IP sessions:



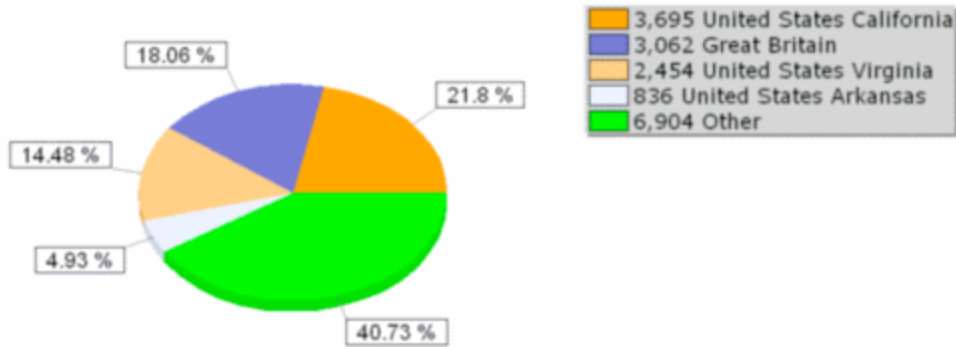
0 - 450 Unique IP sessions 31 December 2006 – 19 March 2007

EvaMcgill.co.uk Hits:



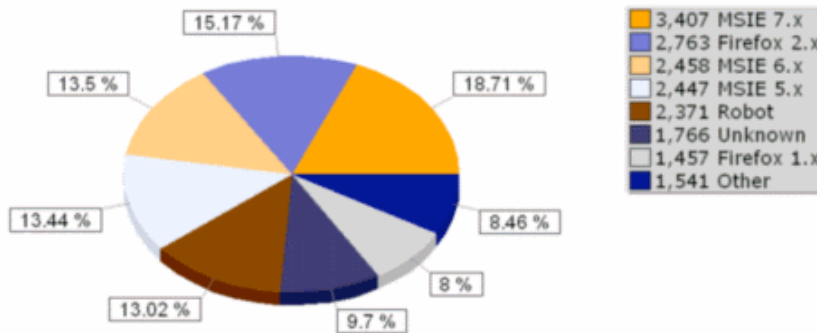
Average session time: 564 seconds

0 – 9000 Hits 31 December 2006 – 19 March 2007



Worldwide proportions of audience visits to evamcgill.co.uk, the game's main character video blog site.

Visitors to one of the game's central sites, the blog of the main protagonist Eva McGill, came from every continent globally. The chart shows the main geographical activity, with the US making up the majority, particularly the state of California.



Web site browser usage for evamcgill.co.uk 31 December 2006 – 19 March 2007

## Conclusion

MeiGeist has proved to be a very successful experiment in the genre of Alternate Reality Gaming. As such it represents an excellent example of how public funding can be valuable for new media projects:

- Creative practitioners given the chance to extend multi-media skills
- Worldwide audience reached and immediate audience reaction documented
- Online community documentation gives an accurate analysis of demographic and virtual socialising
- Raised reputation of producers brings commercial sponsorship for future projects