cache me if you can

by jeremy freese and eszter hargittai

From where we sit, the closest one is disguised as a switch plate on the back of a utility box. Next is a fake stone in some bushes in front of the headquarters of an international humanitarian organization. After that is one disguised as a piece of a planter next to a park bench; then a small magnet stuck to a sprinkler; then a jar hidden among the rocks on the lake. Nearby also is one at the train station that you can only find if you answer questions about the mosaic there, as well as one that requires you to calculate where the lake shore would have been 11,000 years ago.

These hidden treasures are called *geocaches,* and there are now over a million of them worldwide. You are just as likely to find one—we have—in a small rural Iowa town as you are in New York's Central Park, on the Strip in Vegas, or overlooking the Danube in Budapest. If you find one, it will have a paper log inside for you to sign. Perhaps it will also contain some trinkets: stickers, key chains, toys, a mini compass, or whatever else those who found it before felt like leaving. You are welcome to take one of these as a trophy of your success, but you are expected to leave something of your own in return.

Other kinds of collective treasure hunts predate geocaching, but nothing with so many participants and so many objects to find. Geocaching began when the US government allowed civilian access to accurate GPS signals in 2000. Ever since, people have been hiding caches and making their locations public by specifying their GPS coordinates. The largest of the various websites that moderate and catalog these treasures is geocaching.com. Each cache has a separate webpage with GPS coordinates, a map of its location, a description left by the person who hid it, and notes from other "cachers" who have hunted it. You can either print out this information or use a smartphone or GPS device to bring the information with you on the trail.

Coordinates will get you within a

few feet of the cache in a clear area, or a bit further off if surrounded by buildings or trees. Once at ground zero, it is up to you to use your "geosenses"—sometimes aided by special clues left by the cache owners—to find the cache. The coordinates get you close, but the final step is up to your sleuthing.

People often associate the increasing spread of information technologies with sedentariness and social isolation. Geocaching, though, is a pastime made possible by information technologies that gets people off their couches and into the physical world, from forgotten streets to gorgeous forest preserves, from installations of public art to beaches and lagoons. It also brings strangers together through meetings on the trail, organized group hunts, and requests for clues.

As an outdoor hobby, geocaching appeals to people's timeless enthusiasm for solving puzzles. But it's also an online hobby and shares much of the same spirit as other successful user-generated content projects like Wikipedia and YouTube. Centralized websites list geocaches, but the caches themselves are created by users who rely on ingenuity and local knowledge to come up with clever hiding spots, containers, descriptions, and clues. We found a cache called "Superman" hidden in a phone booth; another called "Reel It In" turned out to be suspended by forty feet of fishing line through a hole in a footbridge.

Hiding geocaches provides an opportunity for personal expression as well as demonstrations of local pride and knowledge of area history. In our own city of Evanston, Illinois, we recently learned the story of a freighter called the George Morley, which caught fire and

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Photo by Greg Pearl

sank in 1892 only about 150 yards off the coast of Lake Michigan. Its wooden beams are still visible from the surface, but we only learned about the wreck because someone hid a cache on it: a shiny blue tube placed about fifteen feet deep for anyone willing to go out in a kayak and hold their breath.

Geocaching can also serve as a tour guide to discover lesser-known sights that otherwise may have gone overlooked in a new place. In comments on geocaches, people will often express gratitude by saying things like, "If it wasn't for geo-

caching, I never would have stopped at this lovely place." In just a year of caching, we have often felt the same way. In a short time, one or the other of us has visited the half-size Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Altoona, Pennsylvania; the kinetic sculpture atop the National Academies building in Washington, D.C.; the Le Corbusier house in Zurich, Switzerland; and the Carfax Tower in Oxford, England, all thanks to the geocaches hidden in and around them.

As another example, during an otherwise uneventful drive from Central Pennsylvania to Niagara Falls, the cacher is invited to visit the Nannen Arboretum in Ellicottville, New York. The cache owners took the time to devise an elaborate tour of the gardens for the visitor: the multi-stage puzzle requires one to answer several different questions about the grounds in order to calculate the GPS coordinates of the container. During the hunt, the visitor learns about the history of the garden and its founders, as well as the more than 250 species of trees, herbs, and other plants located on the premises.

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The collective wisdom of geocachers is more varied, colorful, and intimate than anything you'd find in a guide book. A group in Indiana began a series of "Spirit Quest" caches hidden in small pioneer cemeteries. The online descriptions include information and photographs about the founding families of nearby towns who are buried on site. The idea has caught on, and now several hundred

such caches can be found across numerous states.

In the Chicago area, a series of "Hole in the Wall" caches are hidden near neighborhood bars and restaurants that visitors are encouraged to try. Because listing guidelines forbid mentioning specific business names, there is no fear of the site getting overtaken by commercial interests. Instead, cachers come up with creative ways to reference their favorite locales (for example a cache hidden near an LL Bean store is called "B.B. Legume").

People also use geocaches to commemorate locations with personal relevance and tell their stories in the cache description. For example, the fake switch plate mentioned earlier is found across the street from where its hider got married. A series called "Where Did You Grow Up?" features caches hidden by users in places important to their youth. Caches are placed in honor of birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and geocaching-related milestones like someone's 100th or 1,000th find. In Spring 2010, a series of caches were placed across the globe with accompanying events on every continent to celebrate geocaching's tenth anniversary.

Geocaching's initial hook is the hunt, but part of the enduring appeal is also the community. In the same way that blog posts and YouTube videos let users become involved by contributing comments, geocachers are able to log their successful (and unsuccessful) efforts to find caches. Sometimes these simply state "Found it" or "Thanks," but often logs provide an opportunity for users to share their tales from the field. These logs recount such things as who else was along on a hunt, what else users were doing that day, how initial attempts to find a cache were thwarted, impressions

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Photo by Eszter Hargittai

of the location, and other personal experiences users have had that were related to the cache's theme or location.

As with many online communities, individuals are known by usernames that are rarely their actual given names. Indeed, our own impression is that usernames in geocaching tend to reveal less information about participants' identities, such as their gender, than in other online spaces. Nonetheless, if you hunt in an area for a while, you will start to get a feel for other active geocachers. You might become a fan of a particular person's hides, for instance, and try to find all of them. Or you might enjoy reading someone's logs, or at least come to give special credence to their assessment of whether a cache is relatively easy or hard to find. In this way, reputation and status exists in geocaching like anywhere else, but doesn't appear to be related to people's occupations or wealth.

Geocaching doesn't require getting involved in a community (you can do it entirely on your own) but, the more involved you get, the more likely you are to meet other cachers. People run into others on the trail, and local groups often organize hunts. Once cachers develop trust, they often exchange phone numbers so that they can call or text each other when stuck on an especially difficult hide. As a result, geocaching is a solitary pursuit for some and a highly social activity for others.

In the end, some people may find it curious that so much energy is spent searching for little plastic containers filled with trinkets. To be sure, enjoying the hunt is probably a prerequisite of enjoying geocaching. However, geocaching is more than exercise for your inner Nancy Drew. It's a great excuse to get outdoors, explore new places, and appreciate public spaces that might usually go unnoticed. It's a way to meet new people, and for some, a way to make new friends. Finally, at least for us, it offers a way to combine recreation with speculation on the sociological question: What is the nature of community in the digital age?

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