Geocaching: From an Inside Perspective

Embarking on a modern-day treasure hunt, geocaching has evolved from a niche hobby to a global subculture, captivating the imaginations of adventurers and tech enthusiasts alike. Geocaching, at its essence, is a recreational pursuit that combines the thrill of exploration with the precision of GPS technology. Participants, known as geocachers, utilize coordinates to seek out hidden containers, or "caches," scattered across the world's landscapes. These caches often house a logbook for finders to sign, creating a tangible record of the journey. This activity has attracted many new participants over the years, especially younger people. It is speculated that "geocaching may be one activity that entices adolescents as it combines technology with physical activity…" (Battista 31). What makes geocaching especially fascinating is its ability to blend physical adventure with digital connection giving it appeal across generations. For many, including myself, the experience becomes a way of seeing the world differently rather than just a search for hidden boxes.

Before beginning my research, I had a fairly limited amount of knowledge about geocaching. I had gone geocaching once or twice with my father, who has been in the geocaching community for over 20 years. My initial thoughts on geocaching were ones of slight interest. I was intrigued by the idea of searching for a container as a hobby, but I was also curious about the community itself, causing me to delve deep into research involving the geocaching community. As I kept researching, my curiosity evolved into genuine appreciation. I began to realize that the real treasure in geocaching are the stories, traditions, and shared experiences among those who participate.

Methods

Many methods for gathering information were used throughout the time I spent

researching geocaching. I interviewed my father, observed and took notes while watching him find a cache, and observed the geocaching app. I also looked through secondary sources for any information I did not already have. However, my approach was not limited to these steps alone. I used a mixed-method strategy that combined qualitative research, such as interviews and field observations, with digital ethnography, which involved studying the online geocaching platform and its user interactions. This approach allowed me to examine both the tangible, in-person aspects of geocaching and the virtual community that sustains it. The first stage of my research was exploratory. I began by browsing the official Geocaching.com website and app to gain an overview of its structure, terminology, and user culture. During this process, I made note of commonly used abbreviations, reward systems, and patterns of user engagement. I also reviewed discussion forums and recent blog posts to understand how geocachers communicate, share experiences, and establish community norms.

Next, I conducted a semi-structured interview with my father, who has been an active geocacher for over two decades. I prepared nine open-ended questions that touched on multiple aspects of geocaching: its evolution since the early 2000s, changes in the technology used, social etiquette among participants, and the hobby's environmental implications. The interview was recorded and later transcribed so I could analyze recurring themes, such as nostalgia for earlier methods and frustration over community changes. To support and contextualize this firsthand perspective, I also conducted two sets of field observations. The first involved accompanying my father on a geocaching trip at Starve Hollow Recreational Area, during which I took descriptive notes on our route, methods, and problem-solving strategies while searching for a cache. The second involved in-depth exploration of the geocaching app itself, where I analyzed how digital features (maps, hints, comment systems, user data, etc.) shaped the overall experience. These

observations were recorded in a field journal.

Discovering an Inside Perspective

The interview I conducted consisted of nine questions, including topics such as the evolution of geocaching, the environmental impact, and potential effects of the changes in the community. My father started geocaching in 2001, and was one of the first to dedicate his geocaching profile to finding caches solely with an iPhone. Originally, caches were found by inputting coordinates into a GPS. With the rise in popularity of geocaching, finding caches using the official geocache app became popular. When asked about the evolution of geocaching, my father mentioned he has seen a huge change. 20 years ago, caches were few and far between, leading cachers (those who search for caches) to have to travel long distances in order to find them. What was once a small, tight-knit group has now expanded into a vast and diverse community, with caches existing in nearly every corner of the world.

More recently, there have been thousands of caches created. With the creation of new caches, there has also been a boom in new cachers. When questioned about shifts in the community, my father lamented about the effects new cachers have had on the community. For example, one of the unwritten rules of geocaching is to "stay stealthy". Finding a geocache without drawing attention to oneself is supposed to prevent non-cachers, or "muggles", from finding the cache and mistaking it as trash and throwing it away. New geocachers are usually not yet aware of these rules, so they will not be as careful. This lack of stealth also affects fellow cachers, as the cache could get spoiled if they see a new cacher finding it.

Following the topic of spoilers, my father has also noticed that new cachers will spoil the location of caches in the app, which is another unwritten rule that should be followed. He was also asked about the environmental impact of geocaching. In a study done to show outreach

success with geocaches, it was stated that "Geocaching has been termed 'instructional geocaching' when used to promote learning … and gamification has been used to enhance learning across many fields" (Smith 3). While regular caches give the opportunity to learn about the environment through searching, there is also a special kind of cache called an "Earth cache". This cache is one that you can only find and check off by answering questions about the environment and geographical location around you. This brings more awareness to nature and makes people aware of their surroundings. Through this conversation, I realized how deeply geocaching can connect people not only to one another but also to the natural world, kind of like a form of playful environmentalism disguised as a game.

Conducting this interview with my father was a captivating journey into the world of geocaching. Delving into the evolution of geocaching over the past two decades, guided by my father's experiences as an early adopter, provided a unique narrative. The shift from using traditional GPS devices to the prevalence of smartphone apps, especially his dedication to navigating caches solely with an iPhone, unveils a technological progression that parallels broader changes in society. This interview provided me with a nuanced understanding of geocaching, blending personal anecdotes with broader insights into the community's evolution. It highlights the challenges and opportunities that come with the expansion of this unique pastime, leaving me with a newfound appreciation for the intricacies of the geocaching world.

Field Observations

After the interview was conducted, I went geocaching with my father, recording my first set of field observations and notes along the way. We searched for a geocache labeled "I've Been Starved (GCP5E3)". This cache is in Starve Hollow Recreational Area and is rated a 2.0 difficulty, the second easiest difficulty level. There is also a hint in the app, encrypted using a

cipher named ROT13. This is the traditional cipher used for spoilers or hints in the geocaching

app. It took around 32 minutes to walk to and find the cache. As we searched, my father

followed directions on the geocaching app until we were roughly 20 feet away from the cache.

The cache was hidden in tall grass near the lake's edge, it was a small

tupperware container with a small piece of duct tape on the lid. When we

opened it, we found a log (a

small paper to write initials in) and one nickel. My father signed the log and

Figure 1. Example of a traditional geocache.

put the cache back where it belonged, commenting that the cache was

"traditional" (see Figure 1).

My second session of field observations occurred in the geocaching app. Initial

observations showed that the app had a map showing all nearby caches to the user's location. I

also noted that all caches that are above a 2.0 difficulty require a premium subscription to access.

As for individual caches, the app shows information such as location, difficulty, terrain level,

size, and activity. The activity of each cache shows when it was last found and the status of the

cache (missing, broken, etc). It also shows comments, with the commenter's username, amount

of overall caches found, and if they found the specific cache they are commenting on. While

observing the comments of multiple caches, there were many acronyms used. These comments

are used to thank the one who hid the cache with acronyms such as TFTC (thanks for the cache)

and TFTH (thanks for the hide/hunt). Comments are also used to give extra information to future

cachers, such as notifying them to bring their own pen or pencil (BYOP) or if the cache is a

"park and grab (PNG)". These caches are ones that can be found very easily, usually allowing

cachers to park and find the cache as the name suggests. In the comments of a nearby cache, a

user by the name of oldllychem commented, "Took nothing. Left one of my signature trading

items, an oldyllchem wooden element token, this one for Polonium, element 84". This piqued my

interest as to what a signature trading item was. As I researched, I found

an explanation on the official geocaching blog; "SWAG [Something We

All Get] is often something homemade, or represents a geocacher, their

interests, or where they're from! Geocachers trade swag by replacing

items in the geocache with something of equal or greater value"

Figure 2. Example of SWAG

(Bridgitte). I found it interesting that cachers not only leave items in caches, but some

personalize items and leave them there, almost as another signature.

Overall, my adventure of geocaching and exploration of the geocaching app during my

field observations provided valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of the geocaching

community. The search for the cache in Starve Hollow unfolded as a captivating journey, marked

by the thrill of exploration and the application of geocaching skills. The incorporation of a hint

encrypted with ROT13, added an intriguing layer to the quest, highlighting the clever use of

technology and codes within the activity. Navigating through the app, following the directions,

and overcoming the challenges presented by the terrain heightened the overall sense of

accomplishment as we closed in on the hidden cache. The tangible aspects of finding and

signing the log, combined with the use of hints and encrypted codes, underscored the

multifaceted nature of geocaching as both a physical and intellectual pursuit. It left me with a

heightened appreciation for the intricacies of geocaching and a deeper understanding of the joy

and camaraderie that this unique activity brings to its participants.

The comprehensive features of the app, from the map displaying nearby caches to the

detailed information on individual caches, highlighted the meticulous planning and consideration

that goes into each geocaching adventure. The examination of cache activity and comments

unveiled the interactions within the geocaching community. The use of acronyms like TFTC and TFTH in comments not only demonstrated a culture of gratitude but also hinted at the camaraderie shared among geocachers. The discovery of signature trading items, exemplified by oldllychem's wooden element token, added a personal touch to the geocaching experience. Learning about the concept of SWAG, where geocachers leave items that represent their interests or origins, showcased the diverse and creative ways in which participants contribute to the communal spirit of geocaching. The app, serving as a virtual hub for this global community, not only facilitates the practical aspects of locating caches but also acts as a platform for communication and shared experiences.

Reflection

Through the course of this research, my perspective on geocaching has evolved significantly, transcending my initial limited knowledge and casual interest. The in-depth exploration of the geocaching community has not only broadened my understanding of the activity itself but has also shaped my views on the dynamics of niche subcultures and their interaction with broader societal issues. Initially viewing geocaching as a mere hobby, I now see it as a dynamic subculture with its own set of norms, challenges, and unique dynamics. The juxtaposition of the traditional method of using GPS coordinates with the modern geocaching app showcases the seamless integration of technology into recreational pursuits. The community's evolution over time, as shared through my father's experiences, highlights the delicate balance between growth and the preservation of the ethos that defines geocaching. One of the most significant revelations has been the impact of new participants on the established norms of the geocaching community. The challenges posed by the influx of "muggles" or inexperienced geocachers underscore broader societal issues of adaptation and education within

niche cultures. It prompts reflection on the role of education and community engagement in preserving the integrity of subcultures amid their growing popularity. Moreover, the positive environmental impact of geocaching, particularly through Earth caches, serves as a microcosm of the potential for recreational activities to contribute to broader cultural and environmental awareness. The incorporation of educational elements into the geocaching experience not only enhances the enjoyment for participants but also aligns with the growing global emphasis on environmental consciousness. This research has not only deepened my appreciation for geocaching but has also sparked broader reflections on the intersection of technology, community dynamics, and environmental consciousness in recreational pursuits.

This research has not only deepened my appreciation for geocaching but has also sparked broader reflections on the intersection of technology, community dynamics, and environmental consciousness in recreational pursuits. The insights gained from delving into this subculture encourage a more thoughtful consideration of how niche communities intersect with and impact the broader cultural landscape. It underscores the importance of preserving the essence of these unique pastimes while embracing the opportunities that technology and cultural evolution bring to the table.

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