

December 9, 2007

The High Tech Adventure Begins

Two friends and I went out with some Internet printouts, a couple of handheld high tech gizmos, a backpack full of dollar store trinkets, and a sense of adventure. To us this was a recipe for adventure and a great excuse to take a long lunch on a gorgeous afternoon. It was time to do some "Tomb Raiding". Two hours later, and a few miles of wandering around a rock quarry from days gone by, we found the cache. We had experienced a place we had never known was there only a few miles from home, we stimulated our minds, and challenged our bodies. We saw some incredible views of the Columbia River Gorge and some welcome exercise was our reward. We found the Tomb. We found the treasure. We went geocaching and had a great time. We love to tell people about the great adventures we have had geocaching and encourage everyone to give it a try.

I would like to introduce the people around me to a new game/sport/adventure that involves the technology of both the Internet and the Global Positioning System (GPS). Most peoples' eyes glaze over when you begin to explain the complexities of geocaching. They don't understand the attraction of using technology to interface with nature. What is it that has attracted people to hide and find over 476,000 caches worldwide (geocaching.com)? Modern technology has changed how we interact with nature. I think I can prove that you can integrate technology and outdoor activities in a safe and fun way. I would like to show you that geocaching can stimulate the mind and invigorate the body. There is always something new to learn with this unique game/sport/adventure.

On May 1, 2000, President Bill Clinton deregulated the Selective Availability (SA) of our Global Positioning System (GPS). Until this time GPS receivers were only accurate to approximately 300 feet. When the SA was turned off GPS receivers were suddenly, as if by

magic, accurate to 30 feet (Dyer 3). This technological advance has opened up a whole new range of business, education, and entertainment opportunities.

This quote by Dave Ulmer in the forward of The Geocaching Handbook reveals how geocaching was conceived:

I was sure there must be some novel uses for this technology now that it worked so well. What first came to mind was Hide-and-Seek. One person could hide something and someone else could find it using GPS coordinates alone. ... I put together my first GPS stash and placed it near the side of a road about a mile from where I live. I posted the GPS coordinates on the Internet and challenged others to find it. (x)

On May 3, 2000, the game of geocaching was started when Dave Ulmer placed the very first stash in Beaver Creek, Oregon (geocaching.com). This later became known as a cache. Suddenly the age old game of hide and seek moved into the 21st century by the use of modern technology.

Mike Teague was the first person to find Ulmer's stash. The stash was a large black bucket filled with a logbook and various prize items including videos, books, software, and a slingshot. Teague soon began to collect online postings of new stashes and placed them on his home page. On May 30, 2000, Mike Strum suggested the term "geocaching", geo for Earth and cache for a temporary hiding place. Geocaching has increased dramatically in the seven years since that first cache. It started with 75 active caches in 2000. Today there are 2,583 active caches in the Vancouver, Washington area (geocaching.com). There are several caches near Clark College within walking distance. You walk or drive past them every day and don't realize they are there. Geocaching has become an international phenomenon with over 476,416 active caches around the world (geocaching.com).

There are as many different kinds of people that go geocaching as there are different types of caches. The rules are very simple: take something from the cache, leave something in the cache, and write about it in the logbook (Clemens 1). The old and the young, the able and disabled go hunting geocaches. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts hunt and hide caches. People from grade school level to college level like to geocache. People from all walks of life, in all kinds of countries go geocaching. There are over 207 countries that currently have caches placed. There are even caches and cachers in Antarctica (geocaching.com).

There are lots of types of caches, including Traditional, Puzzle, Mystery, CITO, and Earthcaches. There are some types of caches that can no longer be hidden like Virtual, Webcams, and Locationless caches. According to Geocaching.com guidelines they will only post old caches in these categories, the ones that are grandfathered in. No new ones will be published. I tried to find out why they do not publish these caches but did not find a definitive answer. It might be that they were too hard to maintain.

A Traditional cache is the most common type of cache. It is usually the easiest to find. They are pretty straight forward. They give the coordinates, description, and some kind of hint. There are more traditional caches hidden and found than all the other cache types.

A Puzzle cache is the next most popular type of cache. You typically are given the coordinates to the first leg of the cache. When you find the cache you have to answer a question or possibly do a math problem associated with something. There could be one or more caches to get to the final location of a puzzle cache. Needless to say puzzle caches are harder to find. They often get more Did Not Find's (DNFs).

A Mystery cache is just that a mystery. The coordinates that are listed are not the actual cache location. You have to solve something to reach the real coordinates. What you have to solve is up to the person who placed the cache. One example of a mystery cache is a cache

called "Tree Ring". You can discover the mystery cache coordinates by finding two other traditional caches along the Pacific Crest Trail. One cache holds half of the real coordinates and the second one holds the other half. It is necessary to find both caches to obtain the complete coordinates for the mystery cache. The physical location of the cache will be within a mile or two of the posted coordinates from the website.

Cache In Trash Out (CITO) cache events are designed to clean up an area. Most geocachers believe in the philosophy of leaving an area cleaner than you found it. Cache containers will often contain special CITO trash bags. The idea is to leave no trace. This philosophy is something you will hear over and over. They have even created their own website, cacheintrashout.org.

Earthcaches usually give you some geology lesson. There are several out here in the Gorge for example Multnomah Falls, Beacon Rock, and Ape Caves. These caches are approved by earthcache.org. Each of these caches is set up to teach the public a little science about our Earth. Earthcache.org has a list of guidelines that require a cache owner to ask questions about the earth. The finder must then email the answers along with a picture to prove they were there.

There are several websites that have cache information and coordinates such as; Letterboxing.org, [Buxley's Waypoints \(Brillig.com/geocaching\)](http://Buxley's Waypoints), Navicache.com, Terracaching.com, and Geocaching.com. Geocaching.com is the most popular website for geocachers.

Letterboxing.org is the forerunner of this high-tech game of hide and seek. Letterboxing has been around for over 150 years. The participants have been hiding objects to be found by other participants, without a GPS. They use clues, pictures, and descriptions to locate the hidden object. When you locate the letterbox you will find a stamp inside that you will take out

and stamp in your own personal journal. In turn you will imprint your stamp in the caches' journal.

Navicache.com and Buxley's Waypoints collaborate with each other. Buxley's Waypoints has the maps and Navicache.com has the cache information and coordinates. Each cache listing with Navicache.com shows a map of the location along with a hint for finding the cache. It also list information on the last time the cache was found.

Buxley's Waypoints (Brillig.com/geocaching) is a website that is trying to remain commercial free and free to the public. You do not have to sign up and be a member to find cache information from this website. As of December 9, 2007 Buxley's has 7,434 caches listed on the website.

Terracaching.com is another website that lists cache coordinates. The focus and approach of this website leans toward promoting quality over quantity. You are required to have two sponsors to register at terracaching.com. These sponsors approve any new caches you want to hide.

Geocaching.com leads the industry in overall members and cache listings. On September 2, 2000 when the website was launched, they had 75 known caches in the world (geocaching.com). As of February 2004, there were 76,477 caches listed in 190 countries and nearly 10,000 people trying to uncover them (Clemens 3). When I checked the statistics at geocaching.com on October 24, 2007, they had 476,416 active caches and today, November 19, 2007, they list 486,768 active caches (geocaching.com). That is over 10,352 new cache listings in 25 days, or over 400 per day. You can see that this website and game is growing exponentially. No other website with cache listings has anywhere close to these numbers.

In the majority of websites you choose, you will have to create a user name and password. This is free and only takes a few minutes to complete. With your new user name you

can log in to the website of your choice and begin to look for your first cache to go out searching for. The easiest way to search is by zip code. Each cache will have a description, coordinates and a map. It might also include a picture, a theme, a hint, or parking coordinates. After reading through some cache listings and finding one that sounds interesting to you, print it out. When you go out geocaching make sure to take the print out with you, you will probably read it more than once.

Next you will have to enter the coordinates into the GPS receiver. Start by marking a waypoint (on my unit the icon is a push pin). Now you can edit the mark to the coordinates of the cache you want to find. This is done much like entering text on your cell phone. Save and then set a GOTO (my unit has a button that says goto). When the GPS receiver finishes its uploading you will see a map of the area with a red line from where you are now to where you want to go. Make sure your first couple of caches are in an area you are familiar with, and as your experience grows you can expand your searches into unknown areas.

Follow the GPS to the cache coordinates; this will usually take you within about 30 feet. Use all of your senses to find the cache. Look for something that is out of place or seems too perfect, that might be the cache. Now that you found it, open it up and behold your treasure. Make sure to sign the log with your username, comments are always appreciated. Trade treasure items, these are usually small trinkets of little monetary value, but often fun to collect and/or trade. The general philosophy is to leave items of equal or better value. Now go home and log your find at the website.

People who go out to enjoy this great game/sport/adventure usually fall into one of these groups; city, urban, country, or extreme cacher. Each group has a unique set of obstacles to overcome. City cachers have to be more aware of security issues as well as implementing some stealth. It is harder to place or hide containers in the city because so much of the space is

privately owned.

Urban cachers have it a little easier. There are usually parks or open areas to hide caches. Parks make a great place to take kids geocaching. You will need to get permission to hide in certain parks. In urban areas caches are placed closer together so you can do several in a short amount of time. The problem with urban caches is “Muggles” (people who are not geocachers). Remember you are trying not to get caught finding the cache. It might spoil the fun of finding the treasure if you give away the hiding spot, also muggles might come and disturb the cache. You definitely have to use stealth not to be caught finding the cache.

Country caching is what I like the best. Caches in the country generally take longer to find. Not because they are more difficult but because there is a fair amount of hiking involved. These hikes can be a short walk of less than a quarter mile or can be up to several miles. The long hikes through the woods provide an opportunity to enjoy nature. My husband and I have seen more places we did not know existed in the last six months than the whole 13 years we have lived in the Gorge. Country caching has many of its own problems, such as personal safety, the weather, and road conditions.

Extreme cachers are a group all by themselves. They like to hunt and hide caches in the most extreme conditions. They are doing it for the challenge, to see how far they can push themselves. Extreme cachers generally go for the caches rated at 5 (1-5 rating, with 5 being the most difficult). Some factors contributing to the difficulty rating include the length of the hike to the cache, the difficulty of finding the cache, or whether there are difficult puzzles to solve before you can find the cache (Sherman 12). This rating is reserved for caches that need special equipment a boat, scuba gear, or climbing equipment.

You start out and soon have no idea where you are. How can you be lost, you have a GPS receiver (GPSr). It is easier than you think and happens quite often. My husband and I

went on a hike in the Gorge that should have been one mile. We took the wrong turn and turned it into more than 5 miles. Although we knew where we were we could not find the path over the mountain and down to the cache. After a couple of miles the GPSr was not changing. We must be paralleling the cache. We got the bright idea to go up over the mountain. My husband scrambled up first and when he did not come back, I followed. I made it to the top and he was nowhere in sight, I panicked. I started shouting, no response. I tried the cell phone, no reception. I picked a path and moved on and finally caught up with him 15 minutes later. We quickly found the cache and had a good laugh but at the top of that mountain I was definitely scared. We have since added several items to our geocaching backpack. We now carry a set of two way radios with a six mile radius and a long rope.

Remember to always keep your own safety in mind anytime you go out hiking or geocaching. The most important thing is to tell someone where you are going. You will need to wear appropriate clothing for the weather. Layering your clothing will enable you to be both warm and cool. Footwear is very important to your comfort as well as safety. Things you should include in your backpack would be food, water, flashlight, knife, and a first aid kit. You should always carry an emergency kit with waterproof matches, candle, mirror, duct tape, and a space blanket. In [Geocaching for Dummies](#) they recommend the following ten essentials: navigation (map and compass), sun protection, insulation (extra clothing), illumination (flashlight/headlamp), first aid supplies, fire, repair kit and tools, nutrition (extra food), hydration (extra water), and emergency shelter.

There are many biohazards to watch out for while enjoying outdoor recreation areas. Plants like poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac abound in the forest. Watch out for mosquitoes and ticks in the summer months. Here in the Columbia Gorge we have had sightings of bears, lions, and snakes so be sure to be on the alert. Spiders are plentiful and

often hard to see. Because they are hard to see they are hard to avoid. I can't tell you how many times I have put my face into a spider's web. I finally added waterless hand cleaner to remove the spider webs from hands and face. It is also great for removing pine sap from your skin and sanitizing any injuries.

GPS technology is affecting the way we interact with nature and outdoor recreation. The Parks and Recreation Department is using direct and indirect management strategies to control geocaching activity. Direct management has been employed through registration requirements, permitting processes, and exclusion of the sport (Chavez 5). Indirect strategies include information and education. Geocachers are excluded from leaving physical caches in the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service areas (Chavez 5). Geocaching is not permitted in places where it may threaten or destroy significant archeological, natural, or cultural areas such as national parks, national wildlife refuges, and other places administered by the National Park Service (geocaching.com). These strategies will help keep the forest safe and clean for all outdoor recreation users no matter what activity they enjoy.

The use of the GPSr has moved into the classroom. There are several teachers and programs that have incorporated the use of this new technology in their curriculum. The GPSr can be used in teaching many disciplines like Geology, History, Geography, and Physical Exercise. This interdisciplinary technique also incorporates life long learning objectives by adding conceptual and spatial thinking.

A veteran teacher at Spokane, Washington's Lewis & Clark High, Paul Neff recently earned a \$4,930 grant from the Toshiba America Foundation to purchase global positioning systems and digital cameras for the Outdoor Living class he took over just two years ago ("Finding"). This science and math grant has allowed Neff to teach his students about geology and geography and improving their writing skills by writing about their experiences. His students

have also learned to identify the local wildlife by studying the tracks, animals, and scat.

Geocaching offers students an activity they can use for a lifetime. Students can learn about map reading, longitude and latitude, satellite reception, geography, and how technology and physical activity can work together. Programs should incorporate pre- and post-tests for basic skills, including map reading, compass use, using GPSr, and hiking principles (Schlatter 31). Geocaching offers a wide range of benefits to students, including improved physical stamina, developing technological skills, increased social interaction, and knowledge of community resources.

By now you might be wondering why people go out geocaching. I wondered too so I ran a survey in the Geocaching.com forums. I had 63 people respond with their answers and great stories. Although the answers varied the overall theme was one of enjoying nature and being with family and friends (Smith).

Almost all of the geocachers who responded to my survey said that they prefer to hunt for caches rather than to place caches to be found. Another interesting fact I discovered was not that many people attend geocaching events. Thirty three of the geocachers said that they had been to an event. Eleven people had actually had a scary experience with wildlife on the trail, but not one person had an injury because of the wildlife. Most of the responders, about 70%, found out about geocaching from family or friends. Another 15% found out about geocaching from a media source such as TV, newspaper or magazine article. Almost everyone who responded said they were hooked on geocaching from the very first cache they found. The game/sport/adventure of geocaching is definitely addictive. You are hooked from the start.

The technological use of the GPSr has opened up lots of new businesses. There are lots of new websites which I have already mentioned as well as websites like GPSgames.org. Trackable items like geocoins and hitchhikers (or travel bug) are valuable items to a geocacher.

They are purchased, named, and registered by the owner. These items can be found inside a cache and can be tracked on Geocaching.com. A travel bug is a designated travel item with the express goal of traveling. The geocoins are often very ornate and elaborately designed. The travel bug or coin has a unique tracking number engraved on it. If a geocacher finds a travel item inside a cache he/she can take the object and carry it to another cache. Each geocacher who moves or discovers a traveler needs to log his find or move.

Personally, I am most excited about the way my interaction with nature has helped me to lose over 40 pounds. I love to geocache and I love to go out hiking. This game/sport/adventure of geocaching has enabled me to get off the couch and be more active. I love the outdoors and this game has given my husband and I an excuse to explore the recreation areas in our local area. I hope that I have sparked your interest. Would you like to get out and explore the beautiful outdoors? Try geocaching. Not only does it give you an excuse to get outdoors it allows you the opportunity to be with your family and friends. Do you know of some better way to be together? Come on, get out, be involved, and try this new game/sport/adventure. You will be surprised at the benefits that can be achieved by going geocaching.

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