



Why Geocaching Now

from *Local Treasures*

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A few years ago, on a beautiful summer day, I set out to get lost. I was wandering on an island near the Maine coast and noticed a faint gap, a space where the tree branches seemed not to overlap—a deer path. Though I'd been on this island many times before, I'd never headed in the direction that the deer apparently did. So I followed their slender trail, which led me to another and then another, until I'd left the main routes far behind. I was excited at the prospect of being in a relatively untrodden place. Partly, I was energized by feeling so far away from human constructions, even though I knew there was a house a mile away. Partly, I was happy that my quixotic experiment seemed to be working, since I could not remember ever having truly been lost before. To be sure, setting out to get lost on an island is an exceptionally safe way to experience the disorientation and sense of discovery I hoped to induce. Even if I succeeded in losing myself, I knew I'd still be able to find a way back to my kayak—and probably well before sunset.

When I told friends about this experiment, some were surprised that I'd never been genuinely lost, others that I would seek to be. Part of my motivation, I think, was a nagging suspicion that timidity rather than a good sense of direction had kept me found, that maybe I'd never been lost because I'd never wandered very far off the beaten track—literally. And while I'll shoulder most of the responsibility for that tentativeness, it's not *entirely* my fault: it's getting harder and harder for folks in industrialized nations to get off the beaten track, even when they want to. There's so much track nowadays—from forest trails and bike paths, to gravel roads, rural streets, two-lane highways, and interstates—and so many signs directing us to everything from food, lodging, and gas to historic markers, scenic views, and natural wonders. Moreover, detailed maps are widely available describing nearly every corner of this well-trammeled world.

Getting lost would be both easier and harder for me to do now than it was that day, because I've since acquired a GPS, a global positional satellite receiver. More precisely, I have two—a handheld unit and a navigational system in my car. These GPS receivers enable users to know, to within a matter of feet, exactly where they are on the earth's surface. With a

handheld GPS, one may not know exactly how to get from the current location to the destination via roads or trails, but the GPS does reassure by giving a compass-direction route and a distance. Like trekking on an island, wandering around with a GPS provides the reassurance that one can't get very lost, a reassurance that lets many people (me among them) wander further than they might otherwise.

Until quite recently, ordinary citizens could not own accurate GPS receivers. A few luxury cars had moderately precise navigational systems, but only since May, 2000 have impressively accurate automobile systems and hand-held receivers been available. Prior to that date, the United States government had a policy in place known as "Select Availability" (SA), which was an order to intentionally degrade satellite data, so that civilian GPS receivers would be far less accurate than military ones. Whereas the military devices were then accurate to within twenty feet, the civilian devices were only accurate to about 200 feet (in the years since, both civilian and military GPS receivers have become far more accurate). The intentional degradation had been a pre-emptive defense measure, intended to ensure that the U.S. military always have more precise equipment than would the enemy. However, the Clinton Administration maintained that allowing civilians to have access to improved GPS data would have commercial and social benefits, asserting that "worldwide transportation safety, scientific, and commercial interests could best be served by discontinuation of SA."¹ Many such uses have been developed in the few years since. But I find it significant that the first recorded new use was not a contribution to transportation safety or scientific interests. The first new use inaugurated a game.

As I noted in the preface, Dave Ulmer hid some items in a container in the woods and posted the latitude and longitude to an internet newsgroup in no small part to validate and celebrate the repeal of Select Availability. Within a week, two people found his hidden stash. One of them, Mike Teague, sensed that this could be a new outdoor sport, and decided to create a Website where people could track objects they hid or found. From the start, the emphasis was on navigating in new and enjoyable places, and on skillful hiding and

seeking, rather than on the objects in the caches. The premises were simple: place a container with a logbook, and perhaps a few fun trinkets, on publicly accessible land. Post the coordinates, thereby inviting others to come. If you find the cache, leave a note. And if you take a trinket, leave one in its stead. Let others know how you fared by posting a note to the Website. Soon after Teague found Ulmer's cache, he began to hide some himself. Just outside Seattle, Jeremy Irish found one of them. Excited by the potential he envisioned for the game, Irish proposed the name *Geocaching*. By September, 2000, Irish was maintaining the official geocaching Website, www.geocaching.com.

The game has grown rapidly. At the time of this writing, nearly 130,000 active caches are hidden in 212 countries. Irish estimates that between three-quarters of a million and a million people play.ⁱⁱ Indeed, in the last seven days, geocachers reported finding or hiding more than 70,000 caches on the main Website. I regularly see entries from players who have found thousands of caches, and others by people who have traveled the world in this pursuit. Geocaching has become a popular activity not only for individuals, but also for families, home schoolers, elementary and middle school classes, scout troops, and other social organizations. Recognizing that this activity provides a fun way to teach geography and math, for example, the geocaching Website includes a discussion forum on "GPS in education."

Geocaching involves intersections between people and the land, and therefore highlights our ideas about places we deem beautiful (or otherwise worthy of sharing), about competing pressures on land use, about communities formed of people who "share" land, but who do not necessarily live near one another. It is also about finding playful methods to evade the constraining psychologies implicit to certain technologies—such as military satellites, surveillance cameras, and an extended information network—without having to leave mainstream culture. It involves navigation—walking and Web-wending, driving and dead-reckoning, efforts to figure out a healthful balance between old and new modes of transit, old and new methods of cartography. It creates opportunities for people to wander with both a feeling of security and a sense of uncertainty, anticipating that they will find a

treasure in an unfamiliar place. Geocaching gives contemporary people a means of being explorers that is not anachronistic, that is instead absolutely consistent with contemporary conditions. As a highly popular grassroots creation, geocaching is an evolving system, changing in response to internal and external pressures. New players bring new attitudes about what the game is and can be, and the rapid growth has revealed that some non-players are invested in prohibiting or discouraging play. We cannot know what geocaching will become or how long it will last, but right now it is an extraordinarily popular game and a nexus for identifying connections among some significant cultural concerns.

The Lands We Love

My initial attraction to geocaching was that it was a way to discover new and wonderful places to walk. I like walking and day-hiking; and geocachers are, through both predisposition and the logic of the game itself, generously sharing favorite places. I wanted to know what these places were, what kinds of locales others found worthy of sharing. In addition to hiking in them for my own enjoyment, I wondered if these places might reveal important things about millennial Americans, a people who drive more than walk and who spend most of their lives inside. I wondered if our ideas of beauty would be different than those described by writers and artists a century or two centuries ago, people who had more wilderness and ruralness to explore. Would absence have made us hanker for the woods, or tremble at the sight of snakes?

For absent we are. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans spend up to ninety percent of their time indoors.ⁱⁱⁱ Many scientists and social scientists believe that this tendency runs counter to our human nature. They argue the human desire for an engagement with the natural world is so pervasive and so intense that it is probably genetically encoded; thus, by being indoors so much of the time, we are denying ourselves something that we both want and need. We make up for that loss by filling our homes and work-spaces with plants, by trying to supplement for the missing vitamin D our bodies need (and get via sunshine), by making offices with windows a sign of corporate

success, and by eagerly throwing open said windows at the first signs of spring.

In many ways a true cross-section of the population, geocachers also spend more time than is optimal indoors. But the fact that they play this game reveals that geocachers are doing something to fulfill their desire to be outdoors. I surmised that, when participants hid caches, they would probably put them in places that were particularly able to assuage their yearnings for time in nature; they would choose places that allowed them to make the most of their time outside. And similarly, when people searched for caches, I thought they would select the ones whose descriptions led them to believe the place would be compelling—and thus, that the most popular caches would be at the most satisfying locations. Therefore, I began geocaching with the belief that cache locations would be something of a synecdoche for contemporary peoples' idealizations of the natural world. As a corollary, I expected people in different places would have quite disparate ideas about what counted as beautiful—that folks in New England and those in Arizona would have different definitions of a pleasing natural setting.

I was partly right (and partly wrong). The majority of caches—and particularly the first ones placed in a given area—do indeed tend to be hidden in locations that are among the most pristine available. And those who find the caches do regularly commend players for having directed them to a beautiful spot, a forgotten oasis, a new place the individual thinks he or she would not have otherwise discovered. A survey done by Ingrid Schneider of the University of Minnesota substantiates these anecdotal observations; Schneider surveyed geocachers from Minnesota about why they play, and offered respondents a list of twenty-six possible reasons, which they could rank from “very important” to “not important.” An astonishing 98.5% said that “to enjoy the scenery of the woods” was a “very important” or an “important” reason that they play.^{iv} This preference for locating geocaches in relatively undeveloped settings is entirely consistent with the observations that psychologist Peter H. Kahn, Jr. has made about the kinds of settings people enjoy, and about the characteristics we identify as beautiful in nature.

Across cultures, Kahn argues, people have surprisingly similar tastes when it comes to natural beauty. In a wide ranging study, he concluded, first of all, that people like “natural environments more than built environments.”^v And while some preferences are influenced by where one lives, people everywhere demonstrate similar basic predilections about natural environments. Kahn points out that we especially like “low action waterscapes” and landscapes that are “open, yet defined, with ‘relatively smooth ground texture and trees that help define the depth of the scene’,” the kinds of places that get labeled as “parklike or woodlawn or savanna.”^{vi} And we are most comfortable in places where we have the chance to discover new things but have a low likelihood of getting lost. Because these preferences seem universal, Kahn sides with those who believe that we have genetic encoding for some of our responses to nature. He surmises that we react positively to the kinds of environments where our ancestors would have been able to survive most readily.

Geocachers demonstrate these preferences overtly. Although the majority of caches are located within 100 miles of an urban center, most are in places that seem relatively natural. I have visited far more places that included “low action waterscapes,” for instance, than I have dramatic, high action ones—and far more places with water than I’d have anticipated. Oceans, rivers, lakes, ponds, protected wetlands, rice paddies that have been transformed into estuaries, waterfalls, even fountains in parks are favored attributes of geocache sites. Some of the sites I’ve visited have been more like “medium action waterscapes”—100-plus foot waterfalls or rocky ocean views. But with the exception of one cache on the Napali Coast on Kauai, where thirty-foot waves buffeted the beach the day my husband and I visited, even the ocean-edge caches tended to be in places where the power of the ocean is partially quelled, like in harbors or coves. In places where water is not a dominant feature of the landscape, geocachers still tend to locate caches near it. For instance, while I was visiting the Hill Country near San Antonio, Texas, a place better known for its relative aridity than for its waterways, I visited five geocaches: three of them were adjacent to water.

A tremendous number of caches I’ve visited were in the woods. At first, I attributed that proportion to the fact that I was geocaching

primarily in New England, where both deciduous and evergreen trees are abundant, and where state parks and conservancies—while small—are plentiful. But in traveling to other parts of the country, I've found a similar preponderance of woodsy settings—with the exception of the Southwest, where such habitats are nearly impossible. In fact, the preference is nearly as persistent as that for water. For example, when geocaching in South Dakota, I found myself driving mile after mile over flat, open plains, and then—as I homed in on the cache location—spotting a grove of trees or a rocky, tree-shagged gulch. Similarly, when geocaching in a park in Illinois, we wandered for a long while through huge expanses of thigh-high grasses, but knew as soon as we spotted a line of trees that had grown up along an old barbed-wire fence that the cache was nigh

And, in line with the third preference that Kahn observed, nearly all of the places I've geocached have been easy to navigate (and would have been easy even without a GPS). The game includes two measures of difficulty—one for how arduous the terrain will be, and one for how craftily the cache is hidden. Both speak to the expectation that easy navigation is the default; tougher navigation may be a source of pleasure for some players, and so is an option, but those who might find it frustrating are able to avoid especially difficult excursions. Cache owners who place boxes in the woods often include co-ordinates for a trailhead as well as for the cache, implicitly promising a marked route. And most of the time, such caches are within a few hundred feet of the trail. If one has to “bushwhack” much more than that, the difficulty level of the cache is raised to reflect the arduousness.

Some caches are in extraordinarily easy to navigate areas, such as urban parks. The preponderance surprised me at first. Because I was expecting geocache locations to be sites that could maximally assuage our longing to be outdoors, I also figured they would be in wilder places, outside the city limits. Many are, of course. But the edges of the parks have become extremely popular cache locations—and, in some ways, the edges adumbrate the kind of settings I'd been expecting. Many urban parks are highly manicured knolls abutting less-tended areas that are still within the park's limits. In those adjoining acres, one frequently finds caches—as in Brooklyn Memorial Park, in Cleveland, Ohio. The main

section of that park is beautifully tended, but the thicket-filled area between park and a nearby parking lot was the location of the cache. Other caches are squarely within the park area—such as one in a small sculpture park in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or another in a tiny neighborhood park with a single slide and pair of bouncy toys in Halfway, Maryland.

As I found myself being directed to small parks all over America, I tried to figure out why people would choose such settings. For in addition to being less “natural” than the settings I'd expected would predominate (and indeed *do* predominate), these caches are also far more likely to be stolen or vandalized. It's hard to hide a cache in a park well enough that non-geocachers will not find it, but that geocachers will still be able to do so. Therefore, many non-players find caches. Some, of course, simply leave notes in the log indicating that they've found it, but others are less considerate, vandalizing or stealing the cache.

One reason that folks take the chance and put geocaches in parks, I think, is geographic ease. The overwhelming majority of people in the United States live in and near its urban centers; the 2000 Census indicated that 80.3 percent of the population lives on only twenty percent of the land.^{vii} Because cache owners must be able to check on their offerings from time to time, they need to hide them near enough to home that they can do so. Fortunately, some urban areas have significant open space within their city limits. In New York City, for example, one-quarter of the land is designated as open/park space according to the Trust for Public Lands. And while an urban park may not seem like a congenial natural setting to someone raised in a sparsely inhabited region, it may well be deeply pleasing to someone raised in a densely built metropolitan area. It may feel wild, natural. Kahn describes a phenomenon he calls “environmental generational amnesia” that has a corollary here. He notes that “people take the natural environment they encounter during childhood as the norm against which to measure environmental degradation later in their life.”^{viii} I suggest that not only what we regard as “environmentally degraded,” but also what we consider “environmentally pristine” will have been so shaped. Thus, while I may regard a golf course or a city park as a constructed setting, it may be bucolic to someone raised in a concrete jungle. This

important perceptual difference came home to me quite forcefully when, at a flooded cement walkway in Anna Page Park, in Rockford, Illinois, my sister and I came upon three children in bathing suits who were playing, shrieking as they loudly dared each other to go into the water. They warned us to be careful because the water was cold and filled with crayfish. Taking off our hiking boots to cross this dangerous stretch, we discovered that it was about eight inches deep and marvelously cooling. Wildness is in the feet and eyes of the beholder.

Even in places where relatively pristine natural settings are few and far between, geocachers ferret them out. Geocaches are often placed at rest areas on highways; once, I visited one in the woods behind a weigh-station on I-95, the massive interstate that runs the length of the East Coast of the United States. In Washington, DC, a geocache was hidden in a "Secret Garden" that truly was, a tiny lush spot rendered nearly invisible by the surrounding crush of buildings. That geocachers call special attention to such places speaks even more insistently to the human desire to walk in nature, to find solace in natural settings, than do the caches that have been placed in less transformed, more obviously splendid environments, such as the Blue Ridge Mountains or the deserts of the American Southwest.

In addition to the caches which highlight a natural setting—whether in a large nature conservancy or a tiny neighborhood park—are others that underscore something else the cache owner finds noteworthy. Some are at historic sites or major tourist attractions (such as the Alamo or Churchill Downs—where the Kentucky Derby takes place); some are at less famous attractions (such as the statue of Ronald Reagan in his boyhood town or the gulch Jesse James jumped to escape the posse trailing him); still others are at quirky tourist spots (such as one at a toilet seat museum in a gentleman's garage in Texas). Quite a few are at locations that pay tribute to early explorers and cartographers (the exact point where Minnesota, South Dakota, and Iowa touch, for example). A further characteristic that distinguishes these more tourist-oriented caches from the ones in natural settings is that they tend not to emphasize walking, while the ones in natural settings nearly always include a hike, often several miles, from wherever one parked.

Drive to Walk

In Boston, which has a large and easy-to-use public transportation system, locally known as the "T," many geocachers create "T caches." They are not thematic, in the sense that they are not *about* the train system; they are simply linked by being accessible via public transportation. Such caches serve two groups especially well: visitors to a city that attracts many tourists and local geocachers who do not drive (or do not want to drive in this notoriously difficult-to-drive place). Such caches, like the historic caches I just mentioned, contrast sharply with the caches that encourage a walk in the woods—but that also require a car to reach them.

A reliance on cars has become part of the fabric of life in the United States. In fact, cultural observer Rebecca Solnit asserts that walking has become nearly a lost practice in the United States, that 1970 marked the end of the golden age of walking, for in that year "Americans were—for the first time in the history of any nation—suburban."^{ix} The design of suburban neighborhoods, sprawling with plenty of room for automobiles but often without sidewalks, is not conducive to walking. When I lived in eastern Pennsylvania, I often drove twelve miles to Valley Forge National Park to walk a few miles, then got back in my car and drove home. Only recently did it occur to me that this act of driving a long way to walk a short one is peculiar. I hadn't thought it through, in part because it is so common (akin to driving to the gym to use a treadmill or elliptical bicycle rather than walking outdoors or using a conventional bike), and in part because it was a question of safety. My neighborhood lacked sidewalks.

But that very circularity—driving in order to walk at a safe distance from traffic—makes me mindful of the pervasive ways in which cars have transformed American daily life. First and foremost, as Solnit pointed out, automobiles are fundamental to suburbanization. The late twentieth century was marked both by this suburbanization of America and by an extraordinary increase in the number of cars Americans owned and the amount of time spent in them. In 1990, the ratio of people to cars in the United States was 2:1. Moreover, we don't just have these cars, parked in driveways. We use them. A lot. In

2001, Phillip J. Longman noted that "On a typical day, the average married mother with school-age children spends 66 minutes driving—taking more than five trips and covering 29 miles," more time than is spent on feeding, bathing, and dressing the children. Further, Longman observed that "while the U.S. population has grown nearly 20 percent, the time Americans spend in traffic has jumped . . . 236 percent" and that "the average driver now spends the equivalent of nearly a full workweek per year stuck in traffic."^x This rise in commuting time is not an incursion into work time, which has not diminished. Instead, the seventy-two minutes per day that the average American adult spends driving must be taken away from leisure time.

While people can—in principle—change jobs or residences to avoid onerous commutes, doing so is difficult. The 2004 Urban Mobility Study suggests such moves have not occurred; to the contrary, the study notes that "Congestion has spread to more cities and to more of the road system and trips in cities and more time during the day and to more days of the week in some locations."^{xi} One sign of change, however, is increased interest in "The New Urbanism," efforts to create communities built around pedestrian traffic rather than car traffic. In fact, in referendums during the year 2000, voters across the nation approved 400 of 553 ballot measures related to "smart growth," many of which were efforts to encourage pedestrian-friendly communities, to mandate a mix of housing types, and to promote reduced dependence on cars.^{xii} These measures signal a growing dissatisfaction with the pace and style of contemporary American life, but they will take a long time to implement in a significant way. Until such a time, many suburbanites continue to turn to local palliatives, to a host of specialized services designed to help people fit necessary tasks into days that are effectively shorter due to these long commutes. Not surprisingly, many of those services require that folks get back in their cars and drive to the one of the local strip malls to do errands. While such spots provide efficiency by clustering businesses, they do so at the price of replacing the old-fashioned town center, thereby creating a lacuna that New Urbanists, among others, bemoan.

Partly for convenience and partly for lack of time, many people are also turning to their computers to do their errands: communicating with friends via e-mail rather than posted

letter, shopping on-line, completing bank transactions and paying bills electronically. In a culture in which we feel very hurried, in which we fear that we don't have enough time to get everything done, it is no surprise that walking as a form of productive locomotion is in decline. It *does* take longer to walk to the grocery store each day than it does to drive to the superstore once a week. It does take longer to walk to a bookstore than to click a few buttons and get books delivered to one's door from an on-line bookstore. Solnit observes that we have become so reliant on machinery that enhances our speed that the "unaugmented body," by which she means a body not coupled to a car or other accoutrements that make it able to go faster, as "rare." Because we are using our bodies in their unaugmented form so much less frequently, she argues, the body itself has "begun to atrophy as both a muscular and a sensory organism."^{xiii}

As the muscles atrophy, the bodies overall are getting larger and larger. In the United States, unprecedented numbers of children and adults are now clinically obese. In fact, obesity is such a concern that, in July 2004, Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Tommy Thompson announced that language about obesity in the Medicare guidelines was being changed so that treatment could (in some cases) be covered. Because obesity is most often caused by highly caloric diets and insufficient exercise, calling it an illness is a vexed issue. However, it contributes to many illnesses, and the HHS wants to begin to address those issues. In addition to examining our food supplies or exercise habits, an environmental factor worth addressing is the continued proliferation of suburbs and urban sprawl. A study released by Smart Growth America in 2003 revealed a clear link between weight and urban sprawl. They reported that "People who live in more sprawling counties were likely to be heavier than people who live in more compact counties."^{xiv} And the differences can be considerable. The study noted that after controlling for variables such as age, gender, and diet, someone from the most-sprawling county weighed *6.3 pounds more* than her or his counterpart in the most-compact community. The single biggest factor to which this difference seemed to correlate was frequency of walking, both as a form of leisure activity and as a means of transportation: "people in the 25 most

sprawling counties walked an average of 191 minutes per month, compared to 254 minutes per month among those who live in the 25 most compact counties.^{xv} That is to say, the folks in the most compact counties walked about an hour per month more—and were thinner for it.

Much like Barbara McCann and Reid Ewing, the authors of the above-mentioned report, Rebecca Solnit acknowledges that this decline in walking has happened in no small part because contemporary bodies have come to seem insufficient for meeting the demands we've created: an unaugmented body can't keep up in our fast-paced world. Children need to take the bus to school because it is too far to walk, and they require transportation to their various other activities. Adults need some form of transportation to get to the workplace because it, too, is usually too far away to reach by walking, and we have too many errands to squeeze into a day to manage them all on foot. In short, sprawl makes walking not only dangerous, but also impractical.

Solnit is hardly alone in identifying the reduction in walking as a loss and urging people to incorporate it into their lives. Medical doctors and research scientists point out that walking would not only help us to address obesity; it would also enhance overall physical health, cognitive abilities, and memory. Artists who have cultivated walking as part of their work, such as Richard Long and Vito Acconci, make clear that walking permits a profound engagement with the physical world, one that can be transformative. Recognizing these benefits, Solnit expresses hope that people will re-embrace the unaugmented body, see it as valuable in itself and as a symbol. She suggests that an unaugmented body might be a revolutionary tool and that walking might be a kind of social and political subversion, suggesting that "It may be counter-cultures and subcultures that will continue to walk in resistance to the post-industrial, postmodern loss of space, time, and embodiment."^{xvi}

Cultural critic N. Katherine Hayles is also quick to point out that we rarely use our unaugmented bodies anymore. But her emphasis is quite different; she maintains that we have become cyborgs. Though thinking of oneself as a cyborg might seem fantastical at first, when we consider our reliance not only on automobiles and other modes of

transportation, but more importantly on various cybernetic technologies—computers, communications devices, and medical technologies that enhance our capabilities, it becomes less so. Hayles asserts, further, that contemporary humans are so thoroughly intertwined with these technologies that we are on our way to becoming a distinctive species—"posthumans." I believe geocaching is an example of a posthuman mode of play.

Like the artists and counter-cultural figures Solnit described, geocachers form a new and significant walking subculture. But their walk is crucially different from the way humans have walked for centuries. The importance of that distinction is reflected in the difference in popularity between geocaching and its nearest kin—Letterboxing. Invented in 1854 in Great Britain, letterboxing began when a gentleman placed his calling card in a bottle and left it in a secluded spot in the Dartmoor region, inviting others to do the same. Dartmoor is now estimated to have between 10,000 and 40,000 letterboxes. In the United States, the sport began to garner interest when *Smithsonian* magazine published an article about it in 1998. Like geocaching, letterboxing involves walking to a site, using navigational clues to find the location, and leaving a message to indicate one has been there. But whereas letterboxing enjoys a very modest popularity in the United States, with only about 6,000 letterboxes in all of North America, geocaching has that many sites within a few hundred miles of New York City alone.

The chief difference is that, while letterboxers can play using an unaugmented body, like that of a Victorian-era gentleman, geocachers can not. To the contrary, the bodies that wander through the woods or deserts of the geocaching universe are profoundly enhanced, jacked into two of the largest virtual data networks available—the internet and the GPS satellite systems. Players *must* use virtual technologies to augment their corporeal selves, very often doing so in order that those corporeal selves might temporarily escape the built world. They use the very tools that have contributed to the declining health of both humans and the environment to participate in a more engaged corporeal, environmentally attuned life. This paradoxical situation alerts us to the fact that geocaching might give us insight into the current transition from human to posthuman. Thus, if N. Katherine Hayles is

right, geocaching may offer important intimations of things to come.

Humans 1.1

Although people are doing less of it nowadays, the ability to walk is a very important characteristic of humans. Two-legged walking is one of the key changes that paleoanthropologists identify in the evolution of early hominids into the groups that eventually led to contemporary humans. Consequently, these researchers pay special attention to the specifics of how walking evolved and how other species walk. As the importance of this new form of walking to geocaching became clearer to me, as I understood the absolute necessity of being “augmented” in order to play, I also began to realize that it wasn’t so much the irony of using military satellites to hunt for silly putty that had been pricking me (though I do like that). It was the implications of *having* to incorporate virtual technologies into one of the most basic human activities. By employing this new way of walking, geocaching is revealing a change between what humans have been and what we are becoming.

Hayles has not been alone in making claims about the emergence of posthumans. In the last few years, articles and books on this topic have become relatively common. Along with Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman*, Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future* is perhaps the best-known; both of these books stress the twinned contributions that biotechnology and information technology are making.^{xvii} Hayles’s descriptions resonate particularly aptly with aspects of geocaching. In fact, two of the four key features of her “posthuman view” directly connect to this notion of the augmented body. She argues that the idea of the body as inviolate is replaced in the posthuman view; instead, she says that from a posthuman vantage, we think of “the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born.” This sense of permeability of body boundaries means not only that one might add cochlear implants, for instance, but also that one can be interconnected with machines. In this view, moreover, the “human being . . . can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent

machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation.”^{xviii}

In using a GPS receiver and the internet, geocachers have become bound to the communications devices that provide them with data and with access to one another. Tellingly, Marshall McLuhan has described this kind of media-immersion in terms that are close to those that Hayles employs. He calls it a “remote prosthesis,” for rather than incorporating the prosthesis into our bodies, we extend our bodies by linking into the prosthesis. We “put our central nervous systems outside us in electric technology.”^{xix}

Such descriptions tend to engender terror or excitement, calling to mind fictions ranging from William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* to Richard Powers’s *Galatea 2.2*, to a host of science fiction novels, television shows, and movies. Among the most familiar fictional accounts is surely *The Matrix*, which presented a wide range of body-machine fusions. In such works, the prostheses are not merely supplements that allow injured characters to “return to normal.” Instead, they let the characters go beyond the capacities of an unaugmented human. And audiences are encouraged to yearn either for the good old days of corporeality or for the promise of freedom from the body that machines might offer. Such fictions depend, for their impact, on our interest in and anxiety about becoming posthuman.

Our responses to real humans becoming posthuman are often far more blasé. As a child, I found the “six million dollar man” and “bionic woman” so captivating that I still recall the soundtracks that accompanied their superhuman feats. But when my father got a titanium hip a few years ago, my sense of how incredible that prosthesis was wore off even before he had finished physical therapy. In part, it’s because he can’t leap onto rooftops. Still, the new hip allows him to do more than he’d been able to do for years and it does allow him greater agility than he would have had with a healthy hip of his own. The likeliest reason for my sanguine attitude—for our sanguine attitudes—is that the changes we witness are so much more modest than the ones recounted in movies and literature that we do not sense their significance.

But every once in a while, we are able to appreciate a change as it is happening. I recall vividly the first time I realized how adeptly college students could shift between physical and virtual worlds. In the early 1990s, freshman composition students often complained that working on papers in a computer lab (those nearly obsolete rooms on college campuses that house thirty computer stations linked into a mainframe) was impossibly distracting. In the mid-1990s, some students invited me to a group graduation party in the common room of their dorm. In one corner of the room was a computer linked to the internet, and one of the hosts sat at this computer much of the evening. He would chat with folks a while, then surf the internet, then chat. I found this decidedly un-partylike (and impolite). But what matters more is that his peers did not. Just a few years after they had complained about writing in a computer lab, they had become so adroit at splitting their attention between the two realms that doing so was utterly normal. That seamlessness, and the changes in their social codes that acknowledged it, revealed that a thoroughgoing integration of computer technologies had become a new norm. Over the last decade, that splitting of attention between cyberspace and physical space has become common for people of many nations and generations.

The capacity to integrate the physical and the virtual worlds in a healthy way is one of the compelling things about geocaching to me. Geocaching creates opportunities for participants to *extend* their capabilities without *undermining* the fact of humans as embodied creatures in a physical world. Players do not replace actual walking and actual searching for the cache with a joy-sticked computer simulation. But they need to use a computer to participate in the game. Hayles has noted that one of the most serious implications of the posthuman view is “a systematic devaluation of materiality and embodiment”; she recognizes that as we spend more and more time in the virtual world, we may take less care of and interest in the physical.^{xx} Similarly, Hal Foster has suggested that one of the most problematic “dis/connections” of our current, postmodern world is that “our media world [is both] one of a cyberspace that renders bodies immaterial,” and also one “in which bodies, not transcended at all, are marked, often violently, according to racial,

sexual, and social differences.”^{xxi} These equivalently dangerous relationships are both widely evident right now—exemplified by the lack of true care many humans give to their bodies or to the physical world, as well as by widespread ethnic violence, the various amendments banning gay marriage, and other hostilities perpetrated against people whose bodies differ from one’s own.

Geocaching suggests an alternative trajectory, a way to use cyberspace without becoming disembodied, and a way to keep the body without having it defined in essentialized ways that put one at risk. Geocaching demonstrates that individuals who are both technologically sophisticated and environmentally engaged can and do use an extended communications network and a highly developed navigational system *not to supplant* a formerly physical engagement *but rather explicitly to promote* such an engagement—extending our capabilities and adapting to permit new activities and to promote new forms of community.

As humans, part of what we do is adapt. A defining characteristic of *Homo sapiens sapiens* is an extraordinary mental flexibility and adaptability that enables us to interact dynamically with our world. Though our species name is usually translated as simply “modern man,” it is more apt to say we are “humans thinking about thinking.” Because we can reflect, we are well-equipped to invent, to adapt, to participate consciously in our own evolution. And in looking back at some huge transformations in the relationship between humans and their environment—the beginnings of agriculture, the inventions of the wheel and of writing, the development of clocks—we see major changes that forever altered how we lived. We do not say, though, that those changes impelled us from being one species into being another. If Hayles and others are correct in saying we are becoming posthuman, then they imply that the transformation they are identifying is of a different order. Through becoming so interconnected with technological devices, we are reshaping not only our daily lives, but humanity itself.

As humans and machines become more (and more profoundly) inter-articulated, artists, cultural theorists, and scientists and technologists in academic and industrial research facilities are exploring the limits and implications of such change. In a set of

research projects currently underway at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, participants are asked to live for a month in highly technologically-mediated living space and permit themselves to be monitored continuously so that researchers can evaluate how they interact with new technologies. Like the “Microsoft Home of the Future” with its smart door and smart appliances, or the new Lexus which can remotely recognize its owner, the research that MIT is conducting is intended to create smart objects that are conjoined to their users in ways that consumers value. In light of such developments, the seeming boldness of the claim that we are becoming posthuman seems further attenuated.

As important as attributes such as two-legged walking are to being human, perhaps the most critical characteristic that distinguishes humans from other species is our self-consciousness. Our engagement with machines changes that attribute as well; we are literally, as well as metaphorically, altering how our minds engage the world. When our ancestors learned how to make tools for hunting and how to use fire to cook, they were able to spend a little less time getting food while also enjoying improved nutrition. Those alterations in diet are thought to have been key in leading to the larger brains that are a distinguishing feature of our genus. Like our ancestors, we are developing new tools that have led, in a very real sense, to the formation of a much larger brain. This new big brain—the immense distributed network of people and computers that extends over the entire planet and into our satellite systems, this externalized “nervous system” to which McLuhan referred—is allowing us to do new things and is contributing to rapid transformations in how we use the bodies and brains we currently have. We have access both to information and to experts via the internet that would have been prohibitively difficult or time-consuming to find, or impossibly expensive to use, just a decade ago. And since memory is such a crucial part of consciousness, our capacity to store so much data remotely both extends the size of our memories and reduces the sense of urgency that we store certain information in our actual, corporeal heads. *Homo sapiens sapiens* is often functioning as *Homo sapiens virtualis*—man thinking with, about, and through virtualizing technologies.

More than a game

We externalize our memories and cultural concerns into many kinds of distal storage devices, not just into computers. Games are a particularly significant technology for storing such material. In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan pointed out “games are popular art, collective, social *reactions* to the main drive or action of any culture.”^{xxii} They are sites where we can express social or cultural tensions and can engage those tensions safely. In fact, their ability to support such explorations makes them psychologically useful. “Play,” McLuhan continued, “goes with an awareness of huge disproportion between the ostensible situation and the real stakes the game, like any art form, is a mere tangible model of another situation that is less accessible.”^{xxiii}

With geocaching, many contemporary cultural tensions are in play. Rather than being overt in the content of the game, they are implicit in the tools and rules, and in the way that those rules are engaged by the players. One of the main issues, the one I’ve been addressing so far, is how players balance between physical and virtual existences, living both in the woods and on the web, maintaining a body-based connection to the natural world while also participating in the informational and social world the internet and other virtual technologies permit. Geocaching doesn’t give the answer; it simply gives people one opportunity to safely and obliquely engage a tension central to life, particularly life in America in the new millennium.

The game also lets us explore how *community* might work in a future in which living in close proximity to one another is neither a precondition for nor a guarantee of a successful community. As McLuhan noted, games provide “tangible models” for situations and concerns that are too large or complex for us to grasp fully. Geocaching provides participants with a very small set of rules about land and interaction. The requirements to use public land, to inflict as little harm as possible to an environment (no digging, no cutting live foliage), to abide by federal prohibitions, and to care for any caches that one places imply some aspects of the relationship to the land that are likely to emerge. But they do not define them. Similarly, the expectations that one will provide accurate information about a cache

location, fill the cache with materials that will neither offend nor harm, and record visits all imply certain notions of collaboration and gift-giving that can be fundamental to community. But they do not guarantee that such a community will evolve.

Before I consider the ways in which participants in this game enact models for interacting with the land and with other people, I want to note two ways in which geocaching revises some of our expectations for games themselves. These changes—like the recognition that geocachers must walk with augmented bodies—reveal subtle, but suggestive, differences from what has come before. They show us that even our ideas about the compartmentalization of play are breaking down.

Almost fifty years ago, Roger Caillois published an extremely influential work on games entitled *Man, Play, and Games*. There, he outlined six characteristics that games evince: games are free—in the sense that one is not obligated to play; games are separate—they are “circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance”; games are uncertain—the result is not fixed in advance and there is latitude for innovation by the players; games are unproductive—they create “neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, [they end] in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game”; games are governed by rules—the laws of the game supercede ordinary laws; and games are make-believe—they are “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality.”^{xxiv}

Geocaching is consistent with most of these traits: it is freely undertaken, uncertain, rule-governed, and enhanced by a sense of make-believe. And while largely unproductive in the sense that Caillois means, geocaching is not fully so. I’ve emphasized looking for geocaches, but the flip-side to that is that another geocacher placed those boxes in the woods for others to find. And some geocachers are far more interested in hiding than in seeking them. Each day, new caches are created, thereby extending the gamespace, and often adding variations to the basic game design. Because the game grows with each cache placed—both in its internal scope and its impact on the non-geocaching world—conditions do not return to those that existed

at the outset of play. Further, the evolution of the game has led to some productive consequences—most notably “Cache In Trash Out” events. Often held in April, during the week of Earth Day, geocachers designate locales that are in need of clean-up as meeting places. The participants socialize while removing trash from a park or a stretch of woodland or the area around a lake, so that that area will be safer and cleaner. What is produced is not an exchangeable good, but a common good, a locale that will be more enjoyable for everyone. As geocaching has evolved, a more general ethic of “cache in trash out” has become so ingrained that the acronym CITO routinely appears in Weblogs. People will note that a cache area “could use some CITO help,” for example, meaning that visitors should bring a bag and clean up while they are there.

An even more palpable difference between geocaching and the games Caillois defines has to do with the game space. He stresses the separateness of the game, both in space and in time, from ordinary activities. Such a domain can usually be thought of as an overlay onto the existing physical world: a football field is really the grass and marks on a flat expanse of dirt. And while the game is taking place in that game space, says Caillois, it cannot be used for another purpose (I can’t fly a kite on the football field during a game). In that regard, Caillois says, the game space is “pure” for the duration of play.

In geocaching, the relationship between gamespace and pre-existing physical space is significantly different. Geocaches are primarily located on public lands, which by their very nature are heterogeneous and multi-used. The game space of geocaching is therefore not pure, not even for the duration of play; instead, the game space is an invisible overlay onto a pre-existing place, a largely intangible transformation of it. Consequently, the place continues to be other things to other people even as it functions as a game space for geocachers. The Alamo may have been a virtual cache to me when I visited it, but it was still also The Alamo. And it was a historic site, a place of work, a convenient meeting point, and likely many other things to the others who were there that day. Because the presence of a geocache does not preclude others from being in a place and engaging it in other ways, it might be most accurate to say that not only is the game space of geocaching *not* pure, but

also that caches alert us to the inevitable impurity of spaces.

One important consequence of apprehending this virtual overlay onto geography is that it reveals our changed understanding of spaces themselves. Like the teenagers who can carry on conversations with friends simultaneously through text-messaging and in person, this overlay highlights that we have grown accustomed to a technologically mediated layering of social experiences in a single environment. The fact of doing so is not new, but the degree to which we do so is.

In defining this criterion of separateness, Caillois stressed that a game is constrained not only in space but also in time. It has a finite start and stop point. Geocaching deviates from this characteristic, as well. So long as a cache is at a location, one can seek it. And while some parks have rules that limit caches to a year, most do not. Further, because there are no rules about how many caches one can seek, or how long a time one may participate in this endeavor, or what time of day or night one can search for a cache, no temporal boundary can be created. Some caches may be unavailable at night, or during certain seasons, but these are local limits, rather than general ones. Moreover, because it is a worldwide phenomenon, and one in which players act discretely rather than in concert, one does not even need to arrange a time to play with other participants. Thus, quite literally, at any given moment, someone, somewhere, is likely hiding or seeking a cache.

No More Playing in Public

With this increased popularity has come a host of new interest in and concerns about geocaching. Many regional and state parks have warmly welcomed geocachers—some sponsoring their own events, others permitting multiple caches in the parks. Some parks have had more modulated responses: the Cleveland Metroparks, for instance, has been at the forefront in developing policies that balance concern over the environment with an awareness that this new activity is a valid and valuable way to enjoy the parks. Their way of balancing between conservation and access has been to permit caches to be hidden at a given location for one year at a time. Then, the cache must be retired or moved to a different location, a policy meant to balance

this new activity against concerns about added wear and tear to the environment. But some parks officials have strongly resisted the game. Many park superintendents at National Parks expressed reluctance to allow geocaching on the lands they managed. In response, the National Park Service (NPS) officially prohibited geocaching in all NPS managed lands in October 2002.

Just as an examination of the game alerts us to ways that cultural concerns are manifest, attention to opposition to the game can provide a useful vantage on contemporary culture. As someone who enjoys geocaching, I was disappointed that the National Park Service prohibited the game. That ban meant that public lands which have often been preserved for their beauty are not available for playing a game that, in large part, celebrates walking in beautiful outdoor settings. Moreover, I feared the ruling would signal to regional and local wilderness management groups that it may be appropriate to ban geocaching, and such bans would further reduce the locations available for gaming. The US Fish & Wildlife Service, which is responsible for oversight of National Wildlife Refuges, did follow the National Park Service lead, as have many park services responsible for smaller parcels of land. If players cannot use National Parks, which have been conserved and held in trust for all citizens and which the NPS itself considers to belong to all Americans, then players are deprived of both some of the most likely and the most lovely venues. Of the 286 million acres of “special use” lands in the United States (the designation for parks, wilderness areas and the like), 96 million are National Wildlife Refuges while another 84.4 million are managed by the NPS. Thus, while one cannot say precisely how the prohibition will alter site selection criteria for players, it is inevitable that removing more than sixty-three percent of the most congenial land from consideration is having an impact.

Stepping back from such disappointment, I want to consider the policy itself. In banning geocaching, park officials are implicitly saying that the risks associated with the game outweigh the benefits. Evaluating such benefits and risks is at the heart of the very difficult—because inevitably contradictory—mandate of the NPS: on the one hand, its job is “to provide for the highest quality of use and enjoyment of the National Park System by increased millions of visitors in the years to

come” while, on the other hand, working to “conserve and manage for their highest purpose the natural, historical, and recreational resources of the National Park System.” In the light of that mandate, the long-standing ban on geocaching at historic sites managed by the NPS seems entirely appropriate: the “highest purpose” of those sites is their archeological and artifactual character, and so a ban on recreational activities is consistent with overall NPS policy. But many parks are intended as natural oasis in which recreational activities can be undertaken, and generally acceptable activities for those sites include: “boating, camping, bicycling, fishing, hiking, horseback riding and packing, outdoor sports, picnicking, scuba diving, cross-country skiing, caving, mountain and rock climbing, and swimming.”^{xxv} Other, potentially quite environmentally harmful activities, like snowmobiling and hunting, are even allowed in some situations. Given that so many of the activities on this list pose far higher conservation threats than does geocaching, the ban at recreational parks seems counterintuitive.

Furthermore, the ban is inconsistent with the policy of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which is the agency within the Department of the Interior responsible for managing the largest acreage—264 million acres in 2003. The BLM finds geocaching an appropriate “casual use” of the lands, though they note that there are some environments—at “Congressionally designated wilderness or wilderness study areas, at cultural resource sites, at areas with threatened or endangered species”—where it might be less appropriate. Even in those areas, though, the game is not absolutely prohibited; instead, the memorandum describing the geocaching policies says that “it would be appropriate to issue a letter of authorization with special stipulations attached that would address those concerns.”^{xxvi}

Puzzled by the contradictory reactions of the BLM and NPS, I contacted the program analyst who authored the NPS ban, Marcia Keener, to ask her about the 2002 statement which expressed uncertainty about the future of geocaching in NPS managed areas, and indicated that it might be banned. The rationales for banning in proffered there were that “there is often an anonymous nature about” geocaching, and “employees of the National Park Service are naturally concerned

that our policies and objectives are being deliberately ignored and bypassed—without suitable recourse to responsible parties to correct any problem that might occur.”^{xxvii} The crux of the ban, as articulated, is that the anonymity of participants makes it impossible for the NPS to assign culpability if the presence of a cache creates a problem. The NPS is largely correct about this difficulty. However, the rationale seems unconvincing when one recalls that most persons who visit the parks do so without registering, and hence are anonymous. NPS officials would have difficulty assigning culpability for most transgressions perpetrated on these public lands.

Recognizing that the anonymity of players does not differentiate them from other visitors, I asked Keener about the other point—the notion that parks officials were “naturally concerned” that players would misbehave, and that they were worried about not having the ability to “assign culpability.” The concerns with anonymity, threat, and blame seemed of a piece with many new policies adopted or bolstered as part of Homeland Security, and I wondered if heightened security fears in the aftermath on September 11, 2001 had prompted the shift in policy. Keener assured me that the policy was not created in response to such fears, that at the heart of the prohibition were more long-standing and prosaic considerations. Some geocachers who created caches in during 2000 and 2001 did not ask for permission to hide caches in these public park lands—whether because it didn’t occur to them that they might need permission or because they didn’t feel they ought to need permission. And some rangers then, and now, regard geocaching as an inappropriate use of the lands they manage. Responsive to the concerns of the rangers and superintendents who manage the lands, the NPS banned it. That reaction made many geocachers feel beleaguered and they complained loudly, sometimes to parks personnel, more often to one another on geocaching discussion forums. Their tone and expressions of indignation reinforced the NPS staff’s sense of geocachers as often unruly and anarchical, and thus their impression that a ban was appropriate.^{xxviii}

In summer 2004, responding to the public’s growing interest in geocaching, Keener and other NPS officials began to review the ban, soliciting information from a variety of sources to determine whether repealing it might be appropriate. If that repeal occurs, then

individual park superintendents would have authority over whether and where caches can be placed in the lands they manage. Some geocachers will no doubt remain disappointed, since the parks superintendents in a given area may continue to impose a ban locally. But repealing the federal ban would nevertheless be a significant improvement, an essential first step. Keener's willingness to work to address the conflicts between the desires of geocaching visitors and the resistance of various parks officials may signal an important shift in the official position of the NPS. As a geocacher and a citizen who values democracy, I am glad—appreciative of her efforts and of the fact that collaboration can occur.

But these efforts proceed very slowly, and I remain distressed about the creation and continued existence of the ban. The prohibition signals much about official attitudes not only toward the game, but also—and more crucially—towards the public's rights of access to the land. In preemptively curtailing reasonable use of lands that are held in public trust, the NPS ban is more dangerous than helpful. At a time when access is being limited to many parks because of budgetary cuts, the ban further erodes our sense of shared ownership of a common, and highly prized, natural resource. Further, in being based on a *priori* mistrust and the presumption that players intend to disobey the rules, the ban reinforces the culture of fear that is transforming Americans' relationships to people and to the world more generally. Because access to mutually beneficial "common goods" has been critical to defining and maintaining democracies, policies like this one risk undermining the democratic principles America seeks to protect. And it did so because policy makers and enforcers prejudged a large heterogeneous group based on the actions of a very small number of people—some of whom behaved with active disregard of policies and some of whom behaved with perfectly commendable intentions. Creating a ban to disallow an activity that rangers do not fully understand or that they simply dislike, an activity that makes them afraid that rules *might* be broken in the future, is antithetical to upholding the guarantee that citizens are presumed innocent until proven guilty and is antithetical to maintaining a healthy context for participatory democracy.

I am not suggesting that all constraints are inappropriate. Just as I understand the aptness of excluding caches at historical and archeological sites, I see the wisdom in not leaving caches in places where unattended package are likely to make someone particularly fearful. Jeremy Irish and the others who maintain the main geocaching Website share that concern, and so provide a list of places where one ought not put a cache. In addition to NPS lands, the prohibited locations are government buildings, military installations, airports, dams, active railbeds, and highway bridges.^{xix} Placing caches in such places is unwise because doing so would significantly increase social anxiety, fear, and confusion about the status of unattended objects. Were a non-geocacher to spot an odd package in a threat-sensitive site, he or she—and the bomb squad who would be (and, in fact, several times has been) called—would experience unnecessary stress. In sharp contrast, the reduction in risk and fear that the NPS regulation makes plausible is negligible, while the perceived loss of opportunity to enjoy a common good is great.

Balancing between providing citizens with a sense of safety without depriving them of personal liberty is a central challenge facing the government, but (as noted earlier) not the central challenge facing the National Park Service. Its mandate is balancing between the present desires of millions of visitors to enjoy the parks in environmentally responsible ways, and the desires of future visitors to have well-conserved parks that they can appreciate. Due to decreased support for the environment through federal policy and funding, that mandate becomes more and more difficult to honor. In 2000, when George W. Bush first ran for president, he promised to "fully fund" the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a promise that pleased the bi-partisan National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). But in 2003, the same organization issued a "report card" assessing "Bush's park stewardship and gave him a D-minus. 'The administration is not doing the job they need to do to fully protect, to fully fund, to fully improve our national parks' said association president Tom Kiernan." In fact, as Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope points out, "Bush's operating budgets for the parks actually fell by a third--\$600 million short of what was needed—resulting in the loss of one-third of the visitor education activities at Death Valley

and in Yellowstone turning away 60 percent of the school groups that sought to use the park's educational facilities."^{xxx} The financial situation has not improved for the National Parks. In July 2004, responding to Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton's positive reports on the state of the National Parks, Executive VP of the NPCA Tom Martin observed that "out of the 388 park sites, 241 parks will have less money under the administration's proposed budget for fiscal year 2005 than they did last year, impacting visitor services and exacerbating the backlog of deferred maintenance needs"^{xxxii} Such under-funding is leading to readily observable, environmentally serious consequences. For instance, even though "federal laws mandate that national parks should have the cleanest air in America," the EPA included quite a few national parks—notably Acadia, Shenandoah, Great Smoky Mountains, Rocky Mountain, Joshua Tree, and Yosemite" on a June 2004 list of areas with unhealthy levels of ozone pollution.^{xxxii}

Overwhelmed by such circumstances, parks officials might not have felt they had the energy or time to learn enough about the new modes of engaging the environment that geocaching has created. Banning the game might have seemed like an expedient solution to parks officials burdened with many challenges; but such decision-making strategies don't promote democracy, and it is to Keener's credit that she's revisiting the policy.

Playing as a Common Good

Ironically, this federal policy reveals attitudes counter not only to the nation's own founding principles, but also to the disposition of geocaching itself. I've noted already that geocaching involves individuals mediating between the Web and the world, with the players using technologies that were developed for the military in a distinctly non-militaristic way. The NPS policy, prohibiting the game on 84 million acres of public land, also makes evident a fear of strangers and sense of imperilment that shape much public discourse in this new millenium. This discourse emphasizes mistrust, heightened caution, and preemption as appropriate ways of interacting with other people. The discourse and many of the emerging policies urge or require that Americans acquiesce rights to privacy and ease

of mobility for the sake of security. In startling contrast, geocachers employ military surveillance satellite technology to navigate (often alone) in unfamiliar spaces where they take and leave small objects. Often, they establish relationships—both on-line and in-person—with people whom they know initially only by a screen-name. Rather than remain immobilized, geocachers concertedly move about in the world, and make available, on their own terms, as much or as little information about themselves and their corporeal identities as they wish to share.

Because such behavior runs counter to the way Americans are urged to act right now, I have not been surprised when people ask me such questions as "Aren't you scared to do this alone?" or "What's the worst thing you ever found in a cache?" or "Do people ever post coordinates but not put a cache there, just to be mean?" All of those questions presume some lack of trust in the motives and behavior of others. While I am neither so idealistic nor so insulated as to think distrust is never appropriate, my experiences with geocaching offer a powerful counterpoint to the prevailing vision of danger lurking around every corner. Of the caches I have visited, relatively few have subsequently been archived because they were stolen or destroyed (more have succumb to weather than to human wiles). No one has electronically assaulted me. A very high proportion of the disposable cameras I leave in caches (with a mailing envelope) have already been returned to me, a process that typically takes about a year, and no one has ever sent anything untoward in these envelopes.

All of which is to say that, while geocachers are indeed behaving in an extraordinarily trusting fashion (at precisely the moment that the government is advocating, even mandating, mistrust), their confidence in one another seems well-placed. More than that, the game and the emerging subculture require such trust. Geocachers risk disappointment, at least, and serious danger, at most, by walking to coordinates left by strangers on a Website simply in order to find bottles of bubbles, or miniature Barbie dolls, or Mardi Gras beads, or the answer to a question. And yet, thousands of people do so each week, many of them parents with enthusiastic young children in tow.

Attributing their willingness to trust one another to idealism or naiveté would be amiss.

In 1995, drawing on two decades of annual studies by the General Social Survey, Robert Putnam argued that America is becoming both less civically engaged and less trusting; the overall level of trust in America had dropped by nearly one-third since 1972. Moreover, “after controlling for such characteristics as education, age, income, work status, and race,” he showed that “citizens of the nation’s twelve largest metropolitan areas (particularly their central cities but also their suburbs) are roughly ten percent less trusting and report ten to twenty percent fewer group memberships than residents of other cities and towns (and their suburbs).”^{xxxiii} Such a decline seemed momentarily reversed in the immediate wake of September 11, 2001, only to be heightened thereafter under Homeland Security. Keeping in mind that the majority of caches are located within 100 miles of an urban area, we must conclude that the population being described as less trusting and less likely to join groups is the same population from which most geocachers emerge.

Such trust is made easier by some of the specific regulating mechanisms built into the game. People alert one another if a cache contains inappropriate items or is in a place that is off-limits—just as they alert one another if the difficulty level promised seems off. In addition, the process itself makes hunting for a cache feel fairly safe. When I read about a specific cache, I note not only the geographical coordinates, but also the entries of those who have visited that site. I know if the coordinates are accurate, whether the cache was easy to find, whether the locale was pleasing. I am not relying on one anonymous stranger for my data but on a whole set of others who, though also strangers, provide corroborating accounts. I am trusting in a community and its processes. The anonymity and lack of a temporal framework also, perhaps paradoxically, make the game seem safe. No one knows precisely who will hunt for which cache at what time. A cache may be unvisited for weeks or even months. Or, it may be visited by several parties who arrive in such close succession that they meet one another. This uncertainty about who will show up, and when, makes the notion that someone might be there, waiting for the chance to cause harm, unlikely. This kind of trust—in strangers who are part of a social network, in the likelihood that reciprocity will occur, in the safety that an unknowable timeframe adds—is

what sociologists call “thin trust.” Robert Putnam explains that “thin trust it is even more useful than thick trust [which is based on enduring, personal relationships], because it extends the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally.”^{xxxiv}

But geocachers are not just thinly trusting in a process. They are also actively resisting the contemporary culture of fear. That so many caches are in remote areas is evidence of that willingness to trust. Another bit of evidence is that geocachers share intimate aspects of their lives in their forums—as is true on many internet chat sites. Still another is the rise in local geocaching clubs, groups who meet to geocache together and to participate in Cache In Trash Out events. And another is the rapid proliferation of “Webcam caches.” On city streets, cameras that record the actions of passersby and load those images to the Web have become common. Both in Europe, where the cameras have been in use for a long time, and increasingly in urban areas in the U.S., people are designating Webcam caches. These caches do not have a box of toys or a logbook. Instead, they require a pair of players to collaborate to make a picture. One player goes to the posted coordinates, and stands before the surveillance camera. The other waits at a computer that has an internet connection. When the first player finds the camera, she notifies her partner to capture the video image of her standing on the street (likely contacting the partner via cellphone or pager, another pair of increasingly ubiquitous technologies). To log this visit to the geocaching website, the duo sends the image to the person who designated the location as a cache. This use of GPS and web cameras in geocaching is potentially subversive, as it makes individuals more aware of an omnipresent technology of surveillance while providing ways to use that technology in playful, unanticipated ways. A mode of surveillance meant to cause people to self-censor, panopticon-style, and to remind us to feel threatened and cautious, is eliciting opposite responses.

While geocachers may not form a countercultural walking movement of the sort Rebecca Solnit described and desired (for they are using augmented bodies), they are creating a countercultural movement not only by enthusiastically walking, but also because they are using dominating technologies for social and whimsical aims, are trusting one

another, are trusting that the world is laden with bubbles and origami paper more often than with bombs. They are adding to the store of “social capital,” as Putnam calls it—behaving in ways that increase social cohesiveness, interpersonal trust, and community. In 2004, in a display of impressive trust in the emerging geocaching community, one participant proposed a “geo-hosteling” movement. Geocachers who are willing to share their yards (for a tent) or a spare bed in their homes could add themselves to a national or even a global registry. That way, geocachers could travel more inexpensively to new areas to cache and could meet kindred folks. The discussion forum about this idea has far more postings indicating that people think it a fine and workable idea than indicating hesitation. And even the majority of nay-sayers qualify their reluctance with comments such as “if I were still single I’d participate,” or “if I were younger I’d do this.”

E-community IRL

Like Solnit, Putnam dates the decline in a sense of community to the 1970s, seeing the sprawl of suburbs and the rise in driving times as major factors. In *Bowling Alone*, he added that relying on television as one’s chief entertainment is not simply another factor in reducing civic-mindedness; it is “the single most consistent predictor” of civic disengagement.^{xxxv} Recognizing that computers and the internet have been the next development in mediated communication, Putnam is attentive to the roles they are playing and will continue to play. Sensibly, he suggests the internet both contributes to and adversely affects social capital and community-engagement.

One way the internet can enhance community is by creating environments where people with kindred interests who do not live near one another can “convene.” Internet chat groups on subjects ranging from the scholarly to the emotionally sensitive, from the political to the whimsical, flood the bandwidth with a constant stream of conversation. These chat groups tend to be focused somewhat narrowly on their shared interest—which is both useful in consolidating bonds and troubling in not leaving room for extending the parameters of the conversations or the contact. Still, computer scientist Paul Resnick has

optimistically pointed out that what is likely to evolve is neither a monolithic “cybercommunity” nor a set of absolutely discrete “cyberghettos,” but rather a host of “cyberclubs” with overlapping memberships.^{xxxvi} Like nodes in a data network, members will be nexus points in linked social networks.

Just as geocaching makes evident some ways that people obliquely address contemporary tensions about becoming posthuman due to our reliance on computers, it also illuminates ways in which we are indirectly testing out new forms of community made possible by computers. Geocaching’s community is unique: it relies equivalently on the physical and the virtual; it depends on trust and reciprocity in the ways that earlier forms of community did—but has developed a form of indirect reciprocity that is unusual. And it relies on “reputation systems,” as do traditional communities, while still allowing for anonymity.

From my own experience, I know that geocaching offers a way to consolidate existing relationships—giving family and friends an interesting and healthy activity to do together. Moreover, the pictures from the cameras I leave at caches illustrate that many others also cache in groups of family or friends. Regularly, the photographs include two or three generations (once four) of a family caching together. Almost as often, they show pairs of adults. Many pictures show individuals caching alone, though often the presence of a second person is implied by the distance of the person in the picture from the camera. And still others cache as part of scouting activities or school programs. This anecdotal assessment is reinforced by the survey that Ingrid Schneider conducted of geocachers in Minnesota. Of the 133 respondents, 48.1% reported geocaching with their families, another 19% with family and friends, and 24.8% reported caching alone.^{xxxvii}

My photographs and Schneider’s survey do not have a way of taking into account the tremendous increase in the number of geocaching clubs and events. Through such groups and their activities, the geocaching community routinely moves off-line and into the physical world. Discussion threads frequently include anecdotes about new relationships that the game has fostered. I’ve even seen stories of marriage proposal that

required the beloved to geocache in order to find the ring! Apparently, the game creates more contexts for consolidating existing bonds and creating new interpersonal connections than I'd imagined.

Geocaching is hardly alone in enabling relationships that begin on-line to enter the physical world. But unlike on-line dating services or support groups, its aim is not to do so. These friendships and this new form of communities emerge because three crucial conditions for community are built into the game: a need for trust, an expectation of reciprocity, and a connection to land. I've already written about the importance of trust, which is extremely well-maintained, especially given that players use screen names (which permit anonymity). Trust is maintained through the group's self-regulation. Players affirm that they are abiding by geocaching guidelines when they hide their caches—and at that point a volunteer checks that the place is appropriate and that the owner can be responsible for taking care of the cache. After this step, geocachers self-police. If a cache's coordinates are off, visitors let the owner know and post new ones to the Website. If the cache seems to have disappeared, similar Weblogs alert the owner that she needs to check on it.

Another component to trust is reputation. In real life, we trust others in large part because doing so in the past worked out favorably. We have either personal evidence or the reports of others that someone is reliable. Evidence from others is expressed as reputation. And in geocaching reputation is easily broadcast to the entire world. If one creates geocaches that are especially pleasing, then the Weblogs for those caches will include compliments about the location in general, or the interestingness or arduousness of the walk to the locale, or the cleverness of the hiding place, or even the cache's contents. In that way, reputation builds, and geocachers take care to visit caches by people who have demonstrated unusual craft. Similarly, geocachers who are the first to find a cache are often accorded grudging praise by those who subsequently find it. Near my home, someone named WaldenRun often finds caches first. Although I've seen the name on so many cache entries that I've begun thinking of this person familiarly, I actually don't even know if WaldenRun is a man or a woman. I know only of prowess demonstrated and the admiration

others evince. But the significant corollary is that WaldenRun's overall reputation is enhanced by this ability to find caches quickly. Players express great interest in finding caches WaldenRun has placed because he (or she) exhibits skillful gamesmanship.

Most geocachers seek many more caches than they hide, a much smaller proportion of players hide more caches than they seek. In Schneider's survey, the average number of caches hidden was only 3.7 per person, while the average number found was 74.2.^{xxxviii} Even with these skewed numbers, a significant form of reciprocal engagement occurs. Sociologists note that reciprocity enhances conventional communities because it allows people to expect help at some later date. To work as a community-consolidating behavior, the reciprocity must extend over a large group. One year, when I lived in Maine, I learned the importance of such extended reciprocity when I had the bad luck to get my car stuck in ditches half a dozen times. Only once did I need a tow truck; the rest of the times passersby helped me out, always refusing payment. Several times, I was told by the good Samaritan that he'd want someone to do it for his wife in similar circumstances. That situation makes clear one reason why geographical boundedness has tended to be a central feature of successful communities. Reciprocity across a group works best when people have reason to assume the people who will be there at some future point (and hence be in a position to give aid), will share the notion that such helpfulness is fitting.

In geocaching, reciprocity extends across the group in a similar fashion. I am not limited to searching only for as many caches as I have hidden. All players can hunt for all caches; so players become a vast network working for mutual enjoyment. Such group level reciprocity was implicitly built into the take-a-trinket, leave-a-trinket exchange system at the outset. Out of that rule have emerged varied notions about the exchange of objects: some players take nothing and leave nothing (TNLN is the acronym one sees in the United States; equivalent acronyms appear in other languages as well, suggesting that this ethos is as widespread as the game); such gamers are content to have had the walk and found the cache. Other players create caches that are themed—and ask players to keep exchanges consistent with that theme; they are interested in the objects as clever self-expression, in part.

Still other players make a point of leaving more exotic or delightful objects than they take. Most of the players I know are adults, and they tend to leave more than they find—believing that the objects are primarily for the pleasure of children, and that the walk, or the time with family or peaceably alone, or the hunt is the treasure intended for adults. My young niece and nephew are thrilled by the objects they are able to take home from a cache, but also delight in leaving good toys for the next person; geocaching provides simple, fun reinforcement for family lessons about the value of sharing.

In fact, like true gift-giving, geocaching exchanges are not predicated on expecting that the receiver will then offer the giver something. The exchange permits selfless generosity. Extended not toward those whom one knows, but literally toward others whom one will likely never know, such generosity is unusual in the contemporary world. Like charity, it aids a community by making something available for another; but, unlike charity, it is mutual at the material level as well as at the emotional level. By receiving as well as giving, players remain in an egalitarian position in relation to one another. At the level of the geocache as an object, this egalitarianism was especially clear to me when I visited a cache that was a baby shower near my in-laws home in St. Louis. The mother-to-be enjoyed geocaching, so a friend created this geocache baby shower to surprise her. It could easily have been an occasion for one-way generosity; however, the creator of the cache filled it with “shower favors” for others to take, reinforcing the bi-directionality that is important to community (a photograph of the baby shower card/ cache log that visitors signed is on page xii). Far more important than the toys, though, is that geocachers give others an experience: an invitation to discover a place, an opportunity to solve puzzles, a chance to have a bit of fun. Those who give the experience may not ever be given a corresponding gift from those who visit their cache. But the overall bi-directionality is maintained because so many people participate; each day, the pool of potential pleasures grows.

In emphasizing the uniqueness of this form of community, I want to suggest two possibilities. Either it is an intermediary model, a melding of past ideas of how to form a community with newly emerging ideas about how virtual

communities can grow and thrive. If so, this model may wane as computer-mediated relationships become more and more dominant. Or the model of community that geocaching provides is promising in itself, suggesting ways to maintain links to the land and to physical interaction, even as we more fully incorporate virtual technologies into our lives. I am advocating for the latter. Historically, among the most successful, most enduring communities have been those comprised of people living in a proximate relationship to one another with a connection to a piece of land. While nomadic groups and diasporic communities continue to exist, even the latter typically maintain a mental and emotional connection to a location. Geocaching offers one model for citizens in a globalized world to develop a form of coherent community that takes into account an appreciation of land without the risks associated with a regionalist or nationalist link to place. It is not to New England or to the United States that I express a connection as a geocacher; it is to the natural world itself and to the ways that a link to the land can promote a healthier life at the individual, social, and environmental levels.

All That and Green Silly Putty, Too

I have sought to clarify a few of the ways in which this game is both a nexus for current cultural anxieties and an interesting, if oblique, mode of engaging those anxieties. Geocachers do not assert that they hunt for small toys in order to address cultural tensions or to imagine new forms of humanity and community. But some people are so aware of the benefits they've gained through playing that they contributed personal narratives to a geocaching discussion thread entitled “How geocaching helped me to actually get a life, dispelling inaccurate myths.” The thread includes accounts—some quite intimate and serious—about ways in which the individual's life is enhanced by the activity, focus, and community that geocaching affords. Many internet communities include intimate disclosures, of course; the safety that a screen name provides frequently allows people a freedom they do not feel in real life.^{xxxix} However, a difference here is that the game itself is adding to the individual's ability to act and feel healthier, as well as to speak. While discussion forums for those who are ill and for

their families, for instance, provide an emotionally therapeutic outlet, they do not create the conditions for recovery. Geocaching does. To be sure, walking in a natural setting *without* hunting for geocaches would accomplish many of the goods that individuals note, but it would not promote all of them. And frequently players note that they did not walk much (or as much) prior to playing; one geocacher from Texas described going on a diet and beginning an exercise regime so that she'd be able to join a companion on more challenging hunts. The game gave her a health-promoting opportunity, but one that was not being presented as therapeutic.

That ability to make a space for new activity that is both personally and socially interesting and useful is precisely the reason geocaching merits attention. It allows us to glimpse new human-machine interfaces, to understand the ways that individuals in a culture which is both privatized and fearful are striving to create situations that promote trust, and to define modes of community that are forward-looking and satisfying. Geocaching allows us to do so not in a seminar room or a simulations lab, but in our communities, our parks, and our last bits of "wilderness"—as we live the models, walk the walk, and gleefully play with lime green silly putty that a stranger has generously left for us to discover.

NOTES

ⁱ Office of the Press Secretary, The White House. "Statement by the President Regarding the United States' Decision to Stop Degrading Global Positioning System Accuracy." May 1, 2000.

ⁱⁱ In 2004 there were 250,000 account holders—individuals who have actually registered on the main website, and who log their hides and finds to the website. Because many of those accounts represent families or other groups of people who cache together, he arrived at the larger figure. I believe the figure is considerably higher. My account represents two people. However, I have

brought at least thirty-six other people on geocaching jaunts.

ⁱⁱⁱ Environmental Protection Agency, "Indoor Air Quality" (<http://www.epa.gov/region08/air/iaq/iaq.html>)

^{iv} Schneider, Ingrid E. and Todd Powell. "Geocachers and Geocaching in Minnesota: Profiles, preferences, and management ideas." Working paper, December 2003.

^v Kahn, Peter H., Jr. *The Human Relationship with Nature: Development and Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999: 10.

^{vi} Ibid, 10.

^{vii} US Census 2000, Brief. "1990 to 2000 Population Change and Distribution." (Electronically available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-2.pdf>)

^{viii} Kahn, 111.

^{ix} Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin, 2001: 249.

^x Longman, Philip J. "American Gridlock," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 28, 2001.

^{xi} *2004 Urban Mobility Study*. Available at <http://mobility.tamu.edu/ums/report/>.

^{xii} Mitchell, John G. "The American Dream—Urban Sprawl." *National Geographic*, July 2001.

^{xiii} Solnit, 258.

^{xiv} McCann, Barbara A. and Reid Ewing, "Measuring the Effects of Sprawl: A National Analysis of Physical Activity, Obesity, and Chronic Disease," *Smart Growth America*, September 2003, 19. (available at <http://www.rwjf.org/publications/publicationsPDFs/Health&SprawlFinal.pdf>).

^{xv} Ibid, 23.

^{xvi} Ibid, 267.

^{xvii} Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics*,

Literature, and Informatics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002. Many of these issues are also addressed in *The Cyborg Handbook*, edited by Chris Hables Gray. New York: Routledge, 1995.

^{xviii} Hayles, 2-3.

^{xix} In Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996: 220.

^{xx} Hayles, 48.

^{xxi} Foster, 221.

^{xxii} McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet Books, 1964: 235.

^{xxiii} Ibid, 244.

^{xxiv} Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*. Translated from the French by Meyer Barash. New York: The Free Press, 1961: 9-10.

^{xxv} Section 8.2.2 of the *2001 NPS Management Policies*

^{xxvi} United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Instruction Memorandum No. 2003-182, June 2, 2003. Available at: <http://www.blm.gov/nhp/efoia/wo/fy03/im2003-182.htm>

^{xxvii} Keener, Marcia. "NPS geocaching policy Statement." Washington DC: NPS Office of Policy, October 10, 2002.

^{xxviii} Keener, Marcia. Telephone conversations, July 12 and July 13, 2004.

^{xxix} Given this prohibition, and especially given the reasons for it, it seems almost painfully ironic that the only geocache currently in Afghanistan is on a military base housing American soldiers, and that most of the geocaches in Iraq are also in areas under American military control. Moreover, the people who have found these caches and logged the finds to the website have been American soldiers in active service in those countries.

^{xxx} Pope, Carl and Phil Rauber. *Strategic Ignorance: Why the Bush Administration is Recklessly Destroying a Century of Environmental Progress*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2004.

^{xxxii} NPCA Press release, July 8, 2004. Available at: <http://www.npca.org/media%5Fcenter/PressReleaseDetail.asp?id=186>

^{xxxii} NPCA Press release, June 24, 2004. Available at: <http://www.npca.org/media%5Fcenter/PressReleaseDetail.asp?id=185>

^{xxxiii} Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

^{xxxiv} Ibid, 136.

^{xxxv} Putnam, 231.

^{xxxvi} In Putnam, 178.

^{xxxvii} Schneider, x.

^{xxxviii} Schneider.

^{xxxix} In Howard Rheingold's *Virtual Communities*, he noted with surprise the great intimacy he felt for people whom he only knew on-line. In the decade-plus since that book appeared, the proliferation of chatrooms and other vehicles for establishing on-line relationships has made clear that many, many people find such contact satisfying.