

# GEOCACHER STORIES

Risto Sarvas

Visiting Scholar / SIMS, UC Berkeley  
Researcher / Helsinki Institute for Information Technology

[risto.sarvas@hiit.fi](mailto:risto.sarvas@hiit.fi)

IS 272 - Qualitative Research Methods  
Research Paper

*This is a study about geocaching as seen by a handful of geocachers. The study was done by interviewing four geocachers in person and emailing two more - the author also participated in few geohunts. The purpose of the study is to understand better how the interviewed geocachers see their hobby, what attracts them to it, how do they practice it, and what elements of the hobby are worth further study. The usernames (pseudonyms) used in this paper were invented by the author.*

## SEARCH, PLAN, HUNT AND LOG

"I put in my zip code where I live. Four o'clock in the morning, first thing I do, I flick on the coffee pot, flick on the computer, sit down let the coffee brew and start searching and plan my day", Saepe explains how she starts a geocaching day. Saepe is a 42-year-old housewife who has found over three hundred caches in eight months. She uses a website [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com) to find the hidden containers, caches, that she hasn't been to.

"I routinely check the geocaching website to see if any new ones are close to my house", tells Carmady, a 29 year old geocacher from Florida. The site they both use shows all the caches within a 100 mile radius from the given zip code. From the list of caches the geocachers choose the ones they plan to visit.

A geocache is a container located in given coordinates. The containers are often old ammunition boxes, praised for their endurance against the elements, Tupperware containers or smaller containers called micro-caches. The owner of a cache, the person who put it there, posts the coordinates of the location on the website for other geocachers to find. Along with the coordinates the owner gives a short description of the location, hints and clues to finding it, and a rating for difficulty and terrain.

Often the actual cache contains a logbook for finders to sign, and some trinkets to exchange. MikeLisa leave items to trade like "...dsl filters, measuring tapes, hats and flags. I've taken articles such as model airplanes, key chains, and black tape." The father of Vivo, a family geocaching team, tells me: "We generally exchange trinkets, little toys, mostly they are Hot

### GEOCACHING BACKGROUND

[www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com)  
[www.letterboxing.org](http://www.letterboxing.org)

The signal used by GPS devices used to be degraded by the U.S. government but this degradation was removed on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2000. It changed the accuracy of all GPS devices significantly, and made activities like geocaching possible.

Similar hobbies have been around. In *letterboxing* people hide containers and search for them, just like in geocaching, but there is no GPS or Internet access required, although websites have become popular.

Also, a Finnish group has been hunting locations since the 1980s, and started using a GPS in the 1990s.

In December 2002, there were over 36,000 geocaches hidden in 151 countries.

Wheels cars. We leave a couple Hot Wheels cars in there and we'll take something the kids take out, and they love it." Sometimes the cache has a disposable camera for the finders to take a picture, and once the camera is full the owner posts the pictures on a website.

The zip code given is not necessarily from the geocacher's home address. Saepe tells me that once she got hooked on geocaching the caches started to be further and further away. Vivo has faced the same problem: "The problem is we are hunting out the zone near our house." But geocachers are looking for caches everywhere. Silver, a geocacher in his forties with close to four hundred finds, tells me how he has done geocaching while on business trips: "It's wonderful when you travel because you see places you wouldn't see otherwise." The father of team Vivo has similar thoughts: "I might wander around on my own [on my business trip]."

Once the cache or group of caches is selected from all available caches, the information about the selected caches is copied from the website. Dukers explains to me: "I look for groups. I find an area where I go mountain biking. I just download everything in the area, probably close to one hundred, and I load it all to my Palm Pilot also." The website provides the information in electronic form so that geocachers like Dukers can copy the coordinates of the caches to their Global Positioning System (GPS) automatically. Silver also downloads the descriptions and clues of each cache to his handheld computer. Saepe and Vivo use more traditional methods. Saepe copies the coordinates manually to her GPS device, and so she usually double-checks the numbers from someone, who copied them electronically. Vivo, who doesn't use a GPS to find the caches, prints out the maps, clues and descriptions: "I print out the pages related to the geocache, and on those pages you can find maps, both street maps, topographical maps and satellite photos."

An important part is planning the trip to the caches beforehand. Dukers combines his mountain biking hobby, and plans the trip accordingly. He also wants to maximize his number of caches: "On the weekends I try to get at least ... 15 to 16 a weekend." Silver explains his approach: "If I'm going caching on a trip, I'll do research beforehand and generate some maps." MikeLisa is a couple from New Foundland and they have 16 finds in four months. Mike of MikeLisa tells me: "When I decide to go caching I use a mapping program called 'GPS Trackmaker' and plot the caches on a topographic map to examine the terrain and location, so I am prepared before I go." Vivo plans one cache at a time, and takes the safety of the area into consideration. Father of team Vivo tells me: "[There was] a very very narrow walkway. I think that is a little dangerous for me to take the kids on."

After having copied the information from the computer to a more portable form and planned the trip, it is a matter of getting there. All the geocachers I talked to use a car to get near the area. Dukers complains that because he has ran out of new caches near his home "it is such a far drive for me to get them now." Gasoline for the car has become a noticeable expense also for Saepe.



*The GPSs have zeroed out near the cache and are of no use in finding the container.*

However, once near the area, the geocachers park the car and hike or bike to the cache or caches. The GPS's screen has an arrow that points the direction to the cache, but there is more to it than just following the arrow: "The arrow just points, so you have to choose whether to follow the arrow or follow the terrain. Trails are not straight, but the way the GPS points is", Silver describes the difficulties getting near the cache. "Half the fun is to get there", Saepe comments. Although the GPS has a map and an arrow pointing towards the

cache, water or other impassable terrain may block the straightest way. Silver continues: "Sometimes it takes a long time to get to a cache. Sometimes it looks like there is a road that goes there but the map is wrong, there is a cliff on the way."

At some moment the GPS shows the distance to be only a couple of feet and the arrow keeps pointing around. This means that the GPS has "zeroed out", in other words it has gotten as close as possible. Then it is a matter of using one's own eyes and common sense. Saepe tells me that after a few finds you get to be better in finding the caches. You learn how people like to hide caches: "Especially if you look for caches placed by a certain person. I would think 'He wouldn't do that!'" . If the cache can not be found after some time the geocachers turn to the cache's descriptions and hints: "It says here it is easy", says Silver looking at his handheld computer. Dukers tells me that also the difficulty and terrain ratings give some clue to the location of the cache, and then he adds: "Although new geocachers overrate their caches."

When Dukers, Saepe and Silver search together they wait for everyone to find it before they pull the cache out and open the container. The family team Vivo works in a similar way: "If I find it first, I'll signal my wife I found it, and we'll let the kids find it. So [my daughter] generally finds them, or thinks she does, so she's the champion cache-finder."

Once the cache is found the contents are searched. The finders sign the logbook, and perhaps write a line or two. Saepe says that "They write how they felt about the cache and that the view was lovely, thank you." Saepe tells me that she used to "do trades" with the trinkets, but after a while she didn't do it anymore: "It's not about the trades, it's about the hunt." The family team Vivo tells about their findings: "We'll open them up and go through the contents and fill out the logbook." They also like to trade trinkets: "Our daughter took some shampoo, a little traveler's shampoo thing. Our son got an action figure from a movie he recognized. We probably left a couple of Hot Wheels cars." Then the cache is put back for the next one to find it.



*Once the contents of a cache are studied the logbook is signed.*

Vivo's family went for lunch after finding their latest cache, and they usually do one cache during the weekend. Dukers, Saepe and Silver continued to the next cache - it was their "marathon cache day" and they tried to get to as many caches as possible. Dukers told me that after I was done with interviewing them, he would find some more caches with Saepe and Silver, and after he had dropped them off he would find some more.

Once the geocachers get home they go back to the geocaching.com website to post their findings. For each cache they visited they might post comments about the cache, upload pictures they took, write about the trinkets they exchanged, or perhaps how many pictures were left in the disposable camera inside the cache. Each cache has its own webpage on the site where the information can be posted. Saepe would post the findings immediately but "I have to feed the family and perform my duties as a wife and a mother, and then I get to do the posting of all my finds, all my pictures I've taken." Dukers: "As soon as I get home I sit down on the computer - stinking and sweaty. I just remember the first cache I went to and link them all up." Team Vivo's father logs the findings the next day, he comments on the condition of the cache and what the

team took and left in the container. He does it alone without his children because: "It is not visually fun for the kids."

## GETTING STARTED

Dukers started geocaching when his friend introduced it to him. "I was mountain biking with a friend. Suddenly he stopped on a trail 'I wanna geocache!'. So I asked him: 'What are you doing?' He explained the whole thing and I'm like this sounds kinda fun. The next day was my wife's birthday, and we wanted to have a GPS anyway." He bought one on his way home: "'Honey, check this out!' and the next weekend we tried to find our first geocaches." After starting in February this year, Dukers has now found over six hundred caches and hidden over a hundred. He told me that he called in sick the day I went geocaching with him, Saepe and Silver. Then he laughed that actually it is very easy to find out where he spent the whole day just by looking at the logs on the website. Dukers sometimes geocaches with his family: "The kids, you know, the kids can't keep up. But I do it with them, they can go about one or two at a time but they don't enjoy a whole day geocaching. They rather sit home and play video games." He also goes occasionally geocaching alone with his wife.

Saepe got to know about geocaching when her friend told her about it: "I would follow his caches on the website." After a while Saepe's family moved: "I got [here] and had the opportunity to buy [a GPS]. At that point I had started Weight Watchers, and that was when I told my husband I want a GPS, 'cause I wanted to start hiking but couldn't make myself walk. When I started caching, I called it 'walking with purpose'. There's always a treasure at the end of my walk. Since the first five months of geocaching I've lost thirty pounds. That's why I started - to lose weight." She started nine months ago and has over three hundred caches found, some with her family but most of them by herself, and she has hidden over twenty caches. "I didn't know I was gonna get addicted, though."

Silver heard about geocaching from a swimming friend of his: "... last January, and he was telling me how exciting it was. So I told my wife I wanted a GPS, and she gave me one on my birthday." He geocached together with his friend, and "...then it just naturally fit into what I like doing - to



*A travel bug goes from cache to cache, and its route is mapped on the website.*

be outside and hiking. I have always been fascinated by maps and mapping." Since then Silver has found almost four hundred caches and he has hidden twenty. He goes geocaching with his wife sometimes, but: "She doesn't see the point of it. She's one of those people who is very goal-oriented. I'm very process oriented. She doesn't see finding caches much of an accomplishment. But she likes it, she comes out and does it with me, but she hasn't got the same fire under the belly I do."

MikeLisa I contacted by email. They live in New Foundland, Canada. Mike of the geocaching couple MikeLisa told me that he first heard about geocaching from a television program, and "... thought the idea was pretty cool. I had bought a GPS several years before for hunting, camping, snowmobiling and like activities, and thought it was a good way to put more use to the unit." MikeLisa started four months ago and have found sixteen caches and hidden none.

Carmady read about geocaching from a local newspaper in Florida two years ago. "It took about a year for me to actually go out and buy a GPS", he wrote in an email to me. "I was a Boy Scout

growing up, but had not really spent much time doing outdoors activities since graduating college." Now Carmady has found over fifty caches and hidden seven.

Vivo's family team has found all of their five caches together. In my interview, the father of the family told me how he happened to stumble on geocaching when browsing the Internet for a GPS to use on their boating trips: "I'm like 'Wow! What is this?' I started to read about it, and my wife is always after us getting out of the house more. I found there were several [caches] within just a few miles from my home, so it was real easy. We could just go just check out the caches." This was two months ago. For Vivo geocaching is time together with the family: "It's the opportunity to get outdoors and do something constructive and family oriented that's clean. We are very conscious of all the tortured and horrible images kids see on television. This has got virtually no commercialization. You go and find these boxes in the middle of nowhere, and my children get a blast from it." Father of team Vivo told me that he wouldn't pursue geocaching on his own, but with the kids it is a great family thing. Vivo hasn't hidden any caches yet but they have already thought about hiding their first cache on an island accessible only by water. The team will also buy a GPS the coming spring: "The way the system is, we need [a GPS] to hide one." The parents of the team are in their forties and the children are six and two years old.

## IT IS A SPORT

With hundreds of caches found, and still getting excited about geocaching Dukers, Saepe and Silver describe geocaching in terms of hunting and challenge. For them there is implicit status value in being an experienced geocacher - a status measured by the number of finds and the nature of caches hidden. For them geocaching is a sport: competing against other geocachers in the number of finds, hiding mentally challenging caches for others to find, and solving the clever caches hidden by others. Physical challenge is also present: they enjoy the exercise and being outdoors.

### ELEMENT OF COMPETITION

For Dukers, Saepe and Silver geocaching has a competition element in it. They are aware of the number of caches they have found, and how many finds someone else has - they know geocachers with over thousand finds. The number of finds tells about the experience the person has in geocaching.

Saepe tells me what she looks for in a geocacher's online profile: "First I look how many finds they have. Then I try find out where they are from." Dukers looks for the same thing, and also values an enjoyable cache: "Where they are from. What caches they've found. What caches they placed, try to remember did I enjoy that cache or not." Silver says: "The only thing the number of caches can tell you is how long they've been into or how obsessed they are. But usually I like to look at the caches they have hidden."

Dukers tells me of a competition with a geocaching friend of his that turned out to cause tension between them: "When my numbers started getting close to his I told him my goal was to get past

### FIRST-TO-FIND COMPETITION

*by Dukers*

I met Saepe on the forum. She was getting first-to-finds and I challenged her. I almost beat her. A person put a cache, and placed a hand-carved hiking stick as a first-to-find prize, a lot of times a cache has a prize to first to finders, and it was a really nice hand-carved hiking stick. I made a smart remark beating the area people, Saepe people, to the cache.

I drove, and I think I had to drive an extra hour. And when I got there I could see someone's car was there. I looked into the front seat of the car, and there were printouts from geocaching.com, and I figured it was a cacher. So a little girl popped out of the bushes, and it was Saepe's daughter, and Saepe was already heading down the trail, so I ran up and caught to her. That's how we met each other. She beat me to the cache finally.

him, I told him directly: 'I'm gonna catch you, catch you, gonna catch you.' And as soon I was getting close to catching him he started to be not so friendly with me anymore."

The competition element is clearly present in the prestige to be the first person to find a cache. Dukers met Saepe in a first-to-find competition (see "First-to-find competition" sidebar). Sometimes there is even a prize for the person who finds the cache first (see "The Outsider" sidebar).

Hiding a challenging or an inventive cache is a matter of respect. Silver tells of a cache in Virginia: "I saw this wonderful thing he had done with three caches which had the distance to the main cache, so I just emailed him out of the blue 'Gee! I really like that, it's a great idea. How did you do it?'" He looks for caches that are clever, unusual and original, and he enjoys solving a puzzle. Saepe tells me of a cache that can be found only at high tide: "The pier rises in high tide so that it can be reached." I also learn that there are caches underwater in watertight containers. Dukers tells me that he enjoys hiding small containers: "I like the tricky ones. I like micro ones. ... Playing the game under everyone's nose." Silver continues: "You want to make style. There are caches with style and caches that are very generic. We try to hide them with style." However, Saepe has found hiding caches too stressful: "When I started hiding I tried to get really creative, and I got really creative. It was a lot of work to put together a nice creative cache that no one has done. And after I had done those I felt cached out."

The element of competition is present in the number of finds – being the most efficient cache finder. Also, the prestige of being the first person to find a new cache – being the fastest to find. Another element of competition is in hiding the caches – being clever, inventive and creative, and in finding the mentally challenging caches – solving the puzzle, having an eye for caches and understanding the hider's clues.

## ADDICTION

Dukers and Saepe confess that they are addicted to geocaching. Saepe has slowed down, but Dukers is still going on with an average of sixty caches found in a month. "Since the first one took me a long time to find, that I was like once I did find it, there was such a feeling of an accomplishment that I'm like where is the next one", Dukers tells me. When I talked with him he had skipped work to go geocaching. "It's the hunt, it's all about the hunt. People like the pretty view. I've seen hundreds of pretty views, I've been mountain biking, I've seen it all before. I'm not in it for the pretty view, I'm in it for the challenge. Finding the cache."



*Some of the containers are harder to spot than others.*

that. You know, you do that first, your numbers start to get high and it turns more to the hunt than the trade."

Saepe tells me how her geocaching got almost out of hand: "I've kinda had problems with stopping. The amount of money I was spending in gas. It got out of hand during the summer, and I was spending about \$100 a week in gas. I had to slow down. I have literally almost stopped, except for Mondays or if they pop-up around close in my area." The expenses made her slow down: "I would have never slowed down. The only reason I slowed down was financial. ... I was spending a lot on batteries, I was buying every day trade items. But I finally quit doing

## OUTDOOR EXERCISE

The physical exercise is also very important for Dukers, Saepe and Silver. Dukers has been a hiker and a mountain biker much longer than a geocacher, and he still does geocaching with his mountain bike: "Weekends are planned around geocaching and mountain biking, and they go hand in hand."

Saepe started geocaching to lose weight and to get exercise outdoors: "When I started, everything I did was for a hike. I would do one or two a day. ... I was not an outdoor girl until I started caching. So I preferred the long hikes. So I hiked everyday for about four five months." During those five months she lost the thirty pounds mentioned previously.

Silver calls geocaching a mental and physical challenge that fits into what he likes: being outside and hiking. Hiking is very much a part of geocaching because lot of the caches are hidden in regional parks or national forest - national parks do not permit hiding caches. Carmady's equipment tells of an outdoors activity, he mentions that he has bought "... a Camelback backpack, a Leki hiking staff, and a variety of other outdoors equipment" since he started geocaching.

Even though there are caches that are easily accessible by car or boat, and even mountain bikes, most of the caches, including the urban ones, are searched for by foot - at least the last miles from the parking place. Some of the geocachers I talked to do it for the exercise, like Saepe when she started, and others enjoy the exercise as a welcome side product. Everyone mentioned enjoying the outdoors or called geocaching an outdoor activity. Carmady views geocaching like Saepe who called it "walking with purpose". Carmady writes: "I spend a lot of time hiking now. I would have normally found that boring, but the adventure aspect was enough to make it fun." He also mentions that one of the big rewards of geocaching is "getting a lot of exercise".

## IN ADDITION, THE NEW PLACES ARE NICE

"It's really fun to head out for an adventure where you don't know where you're going. You just know there's something there, and it's interesting once you get there, and it feels like maybe a little bit exploring something new. It's wonderful when you travel because you see places you wouldn't see otherwise." After explaining me that Silver tells me about his geocaching experience in Amsterdam (see "Geocaching in Amsterdam" sidebar), and how exploring new places by geocaching "keeps you from doing the regular tourist things."

At the time Carmady wrote me his e-mail, he had been geocaching earlier that day: "It was not much of an adventure, because it was only about 200 feet from where I parked. But it introduced me to a part of the local park that I did not know existed." He elaborates more: "Also, good caches tend to show you interesting places, so I have found lots of neat local places that I would not have known about otherwise, had it not been for caching."

Saepe found geocaching a practical way get acquainted with her new surroundings after moving: "We hadn't been [in the area] for long. Instead of sitting home alone it was a perfect way for me to get around and actually see where I was living.

### GEOCACHING IN AMSTERDAM *by Silver*

The story I like to tell people about is the geocaching in Amsterdam. It was a car, and it had gotten parking tickets, and it got the boot on the tire. So instead of paying the parking tickets he cut of the roof and turned it into a garden. If you ever go to Amsterdam you should see this. It is a garden with a pond, and trees, and everything on this car. The geocachers there got a permission to put a geocache in this garden. So I never would have found this if I hadn't been geocaching. That was very fun, it was off the beaten track yet still a neat destination.

I'm still learning roads." In her eight months of geocaching she has hiked all the regional parks in her area.

Some of the caches are designed for the finder to experience a place worth visiting, like Silver's story about the geocache in Amsterdam. The location and the view from the cache is one of the attributes that makes a cache appreciated. Geocaches even have a subtype of caches called "virtual caches", which is only a location and has no container. The geocaching.com website emphasizes the importance of the location when placing virtual caches: "Although many locations are interesting, a virtual cache should be out of the ordinary enough to warrant logging a visit."

However, no one mentioned finding new places or seeing great views the primary reason for geocaching. As mentioned above, Dukers specifically mentioned that the places or the views do not interest him. The locations themselves are a bonus, an appreciated addition, for these geocachers.

## IT IS FAMILY TIME

For Vivo, there is no competition involved. The father of Vivo values the time spent outdoors with his family. As he mentioned, he views geocaching as good, constructive and family oriented hobby that is cleaner than television. What he values the most is the enjoyment his children get from geocaching - he describes Vivo's first found cache: "I had the map and the satellite photo, I had all the clues and stuff like that but it really wasn't very clear. So we were off looking and looking, and really actually just happened upon it. ... And my daughter found it, and you would have thought she had found the key to Atlantis, she was so happy. She just loved it, and from that moment I said 'This is cool. This is something we're gonna do.'"

The exercise, or being outdoors is a valuable thing for team Vivo, also the father of the team mentions seeing new places as a bonus. However, in our discussion he sees the attraction and the benefits of geocaching in the way his children enjoy it, and he thinks it is not something he would do by himself. "It is a completely mindless activity other than the fact it gets us together with the family outside the house, see new places and do things that are unusual." He continues: "It is just not [productive], other than you're enjoying yourself, there is no reward to it. ... My kid gets a great sense of accomplishment when she finds it, for her it is probably important because she gets done something. I don't think it makes me a better person for it, but the kids have fun and it's family time which is very important for us to be able to deal with."

But the older kids do not care so much about geocaching. Dukers' children would rather spend time home playing video games. Saepe's son couldn't care less about his mother's passion for geocaching: like Dukers' children he rather plays with his computer.

In addition to time spent with children, time spent with spouse is appreciated. Dukers values the time spent geocaching with his wife: "We like the talking to each other. Because it is a drive between caches, so we talk and listen to the radio and just chat, 'cause lot of times at home we don't get a chance when the kids are running around." Silver mentions that he occasionally geocaches with his wife, although she isn't as excited as he is, and MikeLisa is a geocaching couple.

## IT IS SOCIAL

Dukers met Saepe initially online, they were hunting for the same “first-to-finds”. Dukers explains to me that they follow each other’s logs and findings on the web. Saepe agrees and continues: “You make friends in the community, caching community. Had it not been for the caching community and myself getting involved, I would have no friends. I mean this is where I made all my friends who I hang out with. It’s wonderful!” Silver tells me that he has made some good friends in other places who he has actually never met in person.

The online forum is divided into sub-forums according to general subject or physical location. There is a forum for “Getting started”, a forum for posting geocaching stories, forums for discussing different uses for GPS, and forums for people living in the same region. When I was looking for geocachers to interview I posted on the “Getting started” forum, but I was then guided to my local area forum: “You’ll get more replies that way.” General discussions, like how to get started or which GPS to buy are nationwide, but the discussions on specific caches or getting together are on the regional forums.

In addition to the discussion forums, each of the caches has a web page of its own where all the geocachers log their visits to the cache. That is where Carmady got to know the geocachers in his area: “From seeing the regulars that log the same caches, you get to know who the locals are.” When I asked Dukers, Saepe and Silver what they look for in a geocacher’s online profile they all looked for where the geocacher was from, what area or region.

There seems to be a practical difference between local geocachers and nationwide geocachers. Geocachers from the same area follow each other’s caches and discuss the caches on the forums. The local geocachers have a chance to meet when someone arranges an event - a picnic or a potluck: “You can list the events as a cache, and attending the event counts as finding a cache.” Silver enjoys meeting other geocachers on these events: “It is always fun to meet people you’ve met online, what they look like in real life.” These are local geocachers meeting other local geocachers, who have visited the same caches, and who hide the caches for these fellow geocachers to find. MikeLisa has thought about meeting other local geocachers: “To date I have not met any other cachers except online. I have agreed to help set up a geocache society here in nl.”

## THE SECRET OF GEOCACHERS

Although the local geocachers are a more distinguishable group there is a sense of a universal geocacher community. Not everyone is told about geocaching (see “The Outsider” sidebar). Dukers explains to me why he sometimes wouldn’t tell inquirers

## THE OUTSIDER

*by Dukers*

I was out geocaching and I told my wife “If this [new cache] gets approved, call me on the cell phone”, and I would try to be the first to find it. There’s little prestige in being the first to find. No real competition, but a ha-ha type of thing.

And so it came out approved, my wife called me and I rushed towards it. ... I got there and there’s people already there, friends of mine looking for it “Darn it, they’re gonna beat me to it”. One of them pulled me aside, and what had happened, they got there and they were looking through the bushes and some person was walking by and he asked what they’re doing, and they made up this story “We lost our keys”, and they figured the guy would go “Oh, too bad!” and walk away. Instead he tried to help them find the keys.

So this poor man was looking through the bushes looking for the keys which weren’t there. And when I got there, we couldn’t look for the cache really well, and [we were] hoping the poor gentleman would get tired and leave, but he would not get tired and he would not leave.

So I came up with the idea “Alright, give me a set of keys. I will go back behind the bushes, find the keys and the poor gentleman would leave, right?” So I got the keys, and I call way back behind them, and I go “Oh, look! Here are the keys!” and at that moment I actually found the cache. And so I walked over, handed the keys to my friend: “Go look, here are your keys”, and whispered in his ear: “I found the cache too.” So I was the first-to-find. The man left and they gave me kinda dirty looks because I beat them to the cache.

that he is geocaching: "First you have to explain it and there's the chance of a cache disappearing. If someone who isn't geocaching finds a cache, sometimes they're nice and they sign the log and sometimes they disappear ... the first instinct is just not to tell anyone. Sometimes I tell people, sometimes I don't." Silver has the same approach. He tells me about the risks involved in hiding caches in parks: "If it is a [park] ranger you don't know if [the hider of the cache] had the permission to put the cache there. If you tell for example a ranger or an official what you're doing they might take it away or make a problem to the person who put it."

The other risk in telling about a cache is the possibility it is vandalized. Saepe tells about a cache that she wanted to visit but turned away because she didn't want to reveal its location to non-geocachers. It was vandalized later the same day: "These fishermen boys, punks, whatever urinated in the cache. Yeah, I didn't go for the cache I walked away. ... Someone must have went to the cache while they were there and explained it to them." Carmady has experienced similar problems with caches and people who are not geocachers. The latest cache he hid in an ashtray outside of a public building: "Unfortunately, it disappeared within a month. That is the risk of an urban cache in that they are often discovered by non-cachers and thrown away as trash."

Not every inquisitive passerby is excluded: "To hikers and outdoors people I often explain it", Dukers clarifies. These people seem to be closely related to geocachers and the secret can be shared with them.

Carmady sees geocaching hobby as a common secret. He participated in trying to organize a local geocaching club, but it hasn't succeeded: "I think part of the reason is that a lot of people think of this as kind of a secret or covert hobby. Having an organized group may take a little of the fun out of it." There is some secret to it: not everyone is told about it and geocachers make up whole scenarios, like Dukers' story about the lost key (see "The Outsider" sidebar). The caches themselves are secrets hidden under the noses of everyone, and the people who know about the secrets are the geocacher community.

#### CONFLICT AND CHEATING

Silver has experience with other online communities, namely the Usenet: "Most of the geocachers have not been online, and they are not used to the dynamics of an online community. It's interesting to watch the community." Silver continues his comparison of geocachers' online forums to discussions on the Usenet forums: "I'm more gentle with these people than I would be on the Usenet. I've never gotten even close to flaming on these forums. These people wouldn't know what to do if they saw a flame." "Flaming" is a term used to describe sending hostile or angry messages on online forums

However, the geocaching community is not without its conflicts. The father of Vivo has encountered some discussions that he calls flaming: "[The forums] are very opinionated. Some of them are just blasted." He mentions a particular discussion as very spirited: "A lot of these caches are old army surplus ammunition cans. So now with all the 9/11 stuff going on, terrorist stuff, those are like 'what is that?' if people were to come across them. There is a whole discussion thread about banning ammo cans as caches."

There are also personal conflicts. Silver tells of a geocacher whose cache he didn't like: "... so I got back and was very frustrated about it and said 'Gee, I just wasted two hours of my day searching for this cache that isn't very well done'. Unfortunately the person who placed the cache takes the stuff very personally so he got quite upset." After that Silver has been consciously more gentle in his comments, but he acknowledges that there are always people who take the

comments personally: "He took a criticism of his cache as a criticism of him, which happens online."

The competition element of geocaching has built tension between Dukers and a geocaching friend of his, as mentioned earlier. Dukers goes into more detail: "We were quite friendly at first when I was starting out. At first he was ... [pause] ... we logged some caches and chitchatted nicely, but I don't know why, when my numbers started getting close to his I told him my goal was to get past him." Now Dukers has more caches found than the other person, but the person has accused Dukers of cheating. Dukers' response has been to beat him in numbers: "Right at the moment, I'm trying to get so much ahead of him that he'd just shut up." Dukers tells that the relationship has turned bitter and it is causing unwanted tension in the group of active cachers in his area: "I'm not saying it is his fault but there is tension between us, and that's kinda not nice. I don't enjoy that."

Silver tells me of an incident where a geocacher was caught cheating. The person had posted on the website finds that were forged. Silver explains: "There are these caches called 'locationless caches' which are, for example it would be a cache of a finding a totem pole in your city, take a picture of it with your GPS in it and post it and you can count that as a find. What this guy would do was to go through the web and find pictures of places and find locationless caches photoshopping in a picture of his GPS and claiming he had been there." The person was caught when the original photos without the GPS were published on the online forums. Silver: "He got busted. The general opprobrium that came down on him caused him to modify his behavior." The person disappeared from the geocaching website for a while, but is back now. However, other geocachers have not reacted much on his return: "They haven't really said anything about it. He knows. He hasn't come back strongly, he used to be active in the forum. He just cheated, it's as simple as that."

Saepe is of the opinion that the incident was about what he did to other geocachers, and not just cheating on the number of finds. Because a locationless cache can be logged only once, his forged finds were depriving others the chance to find them: "You can log that place once. Since he's faking it and say he logged a picture of a totem pole in [a city]. That meant that [someone else] couldn't go and really find it. So cheating his fellow cachers, actually that might been a more of an uproar than he cheating himself. If it was about numbers I don't know." In other words, according to Saepe cheating the whole community in using up locationless caches was a bigger offence than just forging the number of finds which doesn't directly affect other geocachers.

## REPUTATION

Geocachers build a reputation from the caches they find and hide. They find caches, and other geocachers look at the amount they have found, and which caches they have found. They hide caches, and other geocachers identify the hidiers by the kind of caches they have hidden, and they evaluate and comment on the caches. Also, active participation in the online forums shapes this reputation. All but one of the geocachers I contacted have between one and two hundred postings in the online forums. These elements build up the online geocaching community.

Some of the geocachers in the same region get together and get to know them in person. They exchange stories and discuss geocaching in events arranged by other locals. They go geocaching in groups, like Dukers, Saepe and Silver with their "Monday caching group". This is the local, offline aspect of geocaching, dictated by the area where the geocacher lives. It is definitely a more physical community in comparison to the larger online community.

Vivo has a different approach to this. According to the team's father, they do not have an element of competition in the hobby, and they have not met any other geocachers nor have they hidden any caches. Nevertheless, Vivo values a cache that is in a location safe for small children, and they have already planned where they are going to hide their first cache. They will very probably create a reputation for people who hide caches suitable for children, and they will start building their own reputation once they hide their first. Vivo has already started to build its online reputation with the handful of posts to the forum. Also, Vivo was looking forward to meeting other geocachers, which will make their team a more noticeable part of the local community.

## INTERNET, GPS, COMPUTER AND A CAR

What initially attracted Dukers to geocaching was the technology, namely the website and the GPS device: "I'm a computer geek." The father of family Vivo also mentions his interest in the technology. However, Silver is quite acquainted with computers and Internet, and he uses his handheld computer when looking for caches, but he doesn't mention the technology as a factor in geocaching. Neither does Saepe, who told me that she isn't "technologically savvy". Carmady emphasizes the technology aspect: "My other hobbies are mostly technology related, including being a big Star Trek fan. I look at geocaching as being a great merger of technology and outdoor activity." But then again MikeLisa do not mention technology being of any importance.

The hub of the geocaching hobby is the geocaching.com website. The caches are listed on the website, the discussions are on the website, geocachers' profiles are on the website, and geocaching equipment can be bought from the website. To the interviewed geocachers the website was quite suitable - no one had any complaints, only minor suggestions for modification.

Although all the geocachers interviewed have at least access to the geocaching.com website, the technology itself fascinates only half of them. However, the technology is clearly present in the equipment used. The GPS is almost as integral part of geocaching as the Internet website. Nevertheless, it is possible to geocache without the device, like team Vivo, but they consider themselves an exception. Also, letterboxing and orienteering are old sports or hobbies that require no GPS device. However, it is clear that the GPS device is the reason geocaching very popular around the world: figuring out coordinates with a map and a compass requires some special skill and understanding of orienteering, *e.g.* the error caused by the difference of magnetic poles and geographical poles. The GPS device delivers the coordinates automatically and with little error.

The third piece of equipment used by all of the interviewed geocachers is a car. The car is used to get from home to the area where the cache or caches are located. Especially, after the area around the geocachers home is "cached out", some sort of transportation becomes essential. Saepe and Dukers have already noticed that their biggest financial cost in geocaching is gasoline. But unlike the website or the GPS, none of the geocachers mentioned the car as fascinating technology.

Some of the geocachers also used handheld computers. Dukers and Silver downloaded the information and descriptions about the caches onto their Palm Pilots and took the small computers with them. Vivo took the same information with them by printing the webpage and maps.

## WEBSITE IS THE HUB

It is obvious from the geocachers' stories and experiences that the website [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com) has a central role. As mentioned above, it is a technical platform for the geocachers to maintain

their community: to build their profile as a geocacher, to organize meetings with other geocachers, and to participate in public online discussions..

According to Dukers the website's owner makes an effort to improve all the time: "It has actually evolved the year I've been on it. It keeps changing. They are always updating the site. They listen to the people who geocache, they listen a lot." The owner of the website is a company named *Grounded, Inc.* The same company sells geocaching equipment, shirts, stickers etc. under the name *Groundspeak*.

The active updating of the website and the openness to geocachers' comments suggests that they are taking the development of the geocaching website seriously. This is confirmed in the *groundspeak.com* website where they write: "The Groundspeak project was started to explore new areas of geolocational gaming and entertainment. Deep in the depths of the Grounded, Inc. labs we're devising new ideas to take advantage of the coming convergence of GPS, wireless and the Internet. Sorry. Can't go into details. We'll just have to keep you guessing." Therefore, it is not clear for what commercial purpose the website is used. Silver thinks the owner Jeremy Irish is not making much profit: "He's trying to make money out of it. He's not making much. ... I mean, it is enough to support them. I think they have more traffic than they expected."

Silver, Dukers or Saepe don't mind the commercial side of the website. They appreciate the large amount of caches posted on the *geocaching.com* site. There are alternative sites, Dukers mentions *www.navicache.com*, but according to him it has too few caches: "I think they started at the same time but *geocaching.com* took off. The whole thing is you have to have caches to find. And if you put your zip code for caches to find in *geocaching.com* within hundred miles of my house there is 1400 geocaches hidden. If you go to *navicache.com* and you put your zip code in there is maybe half a dozen." It seems that *geocaching.com* has done well in attaining a critical mass of users in comparison to *navicache.com*.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study points out some interesting aspects of this hobby, sport, game, and pastime called geocaching. The handful of interviews that provided a personal view of different geocachers underline some aspects that are worth further study.

The interviewed geocachers had different views of their hobby. Dukers, Saepe and Silver were very active in finding caches and had built a distinguishable reputation in the community. Vivo on the other hand, had just started and valued the family time spent together while geocaching more than their reputation in the community. For the interviewees geocaching started as an excuse to be outdoors and get some exercise, or like Vivo, to spend quality time with the family. But after a while the hobby itself became interesting and being outdoors has become a valued side product. However, it is good to bear in mind that the geocachers interviewed volunteered themselves to this study and are probably exceptionally enthusiastic and proud about their hobby.

Another of the interesting issues is the social network of geocachers and how the members of this network maintain their relationships by finding caches, hiding caches and discussing caches. The members themselves are seen through the caches they hide and find, in addition to their activity in the online forums. There is status and reputation in geocaching that is measured and evaluated by the network of geocachers – the community. An interesting aspect of the community is the stories and excuses told to non-geocachers to protect the cache containers against vandalism or stealing. This kind of secretive behavior strengthens the community, and introduces the borderline between geocachers and non-geocachers.

There are two kinds of communities: the larger worldwide online community that is accessible to any geocacher, and the local geocacher communities whose access is limited simply by physical distance. The local communities can discuss specific caches in the area, and also organize offline meetings and get to know each other face-to-face. Therefore, in a local community it is easier to build a geocacher reputation by the caches found and hidden. The online community reputation relies heavily on the geocacher's activity in the online forums.

From technical point of view the geocaching.com website is an interesting platform that facilitates the whole activity. It has developed into an integral part that cannot be replaced, and geocaching is almost defined by the design of the website. A more detailed study of the website would probably show how some design decisions have shaped geocaching - especially in the last years of development. Obviously, the owner of geocaching.com *Grounded, Inc.* has noticed this and is in the business of developing products and services for location-based data, wireless technology and the Internet, and geocaching.com is probably a valuable source of user data and experiences.

## FURTHER STUDY

The purpose of the study was to understand the basics of geocaching from the geocachers themselves, and hear their stories and descriptions on what they are doing. What the study revealed is that there is very much under the surface.

Areas of further study would be about the conclusions or hypotheses made in the previous section. One area is the community aspect of geocaching: more detail on the differences between the online community and the offline communities, some comparison between different offline communities, and how geocachers' reputations and status have evolved over time. Simply put, do similar inferences present themselves if more geocachers are interviewed?

Another area of further study are the discussion forums. This study didn't focus on the online forums and discussions, which are an important aspect of communication and information sharing in the community. There are studies on online forums like newsgroups, chat forums and MUDs that would provide background information to online behavior.

Third area of further study is the platform role of the website. Websites are used for a huge range of purposes to provide information and facilitate some activity. However, there are not many academic studies of these websites as platforms for so-called digital communities. More detail on the interfaces between the users and the website, how they influence each other, has both academic and commercial significance. Especially the combination of the Internet and the outdoors aspect of geocaching is interesting in the development of mobile services. Also, geocaching is an example of location-based data and information technology used in a hobby or a sport.

Also, the role of the other technical equipment used is a matter of interest. How does the GPS affect the nature of the hobby, what limitations and possibilities it provides and do differences between GPSs have an effect. The handheld computer is another piece of equipment carried onto the geohunts. What purpose does the handheld computer have and how does it affect the hobby.

The last area of further study is literature, *i.e.* previous studies and similar studies on digital communities and outdoors hobbies, sports or games. This study took very little literature into account and was based primarily on the interviewees' stories and opinions. Literature on similar phenomena would provide a background to reflect on and some empirical and scientific basis for arguments and hypotheses.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm very grateful to the geocachers who let me join them on their hunting trip. Also, many thanks to the cachers interviewed for telling me about their hobby. Thirdly, thanks to Professor Lyman and the whole IS272 class for support and comments.