



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF PHOTOS

Brian Fulton uses his GPS-enabled phone to find a geocache at the Scranton Iron Furnaces.

Caching in

GPS treasure hunt is worldwide pursuit

While running in the Dunmore Cemetery one day, I came across my neighbors, the Walshes, wandering among the gravestones. The five of them would huddle around their cellphone and stare at the screen for a few minutes, point at a tree or fence, and then run toward it while frantically searching behind and under everything in their path.



KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites

Wondering why this normally wholesome, all-American family was traipsing over the graves of the dear departed, I jogged up to Gene, the dad, and asked what they were up to. It turns out they were participating in a

high-tech scavenger hunt, called geocaching, that has been going on for more than 10 years.

Cache, not cash

The worldwide treasure hunt is managed by **Geocaching.com**. The website was created by Jeremy Irish in September 2000 in response to an upgrade that greatly increased the accuracy of the global positioning satellite (GPS) system. GPS enthusiasts eager to test the improved system hid targets in various locations and posted the coordinates online. Others tried to find the targets using the coordinates and GPS devices. What began as a niche activity started to generate some buzz and has grown into an international pursuit involving millions of participants.

The "treasures" that are hidden around the world are called caches. They vary in size from a 35mm film canister to a five-gallon bucket. They also can be unusual items like fake rocks or magnetic key cases. Inside each cache is a logsheet that the finder signs. Many caches also contain additional items, such as small toys or other interesting things. The finder can take an item, but is supposed to replace it with another item of equal or greater value. After you

Brian and Kevin's big adventure

Times-Tribune librarian — and part bloodhound — Brian Fulton and I decided to try our luck at geocaching. We picked a cache at the Scranton Iron Furnaces to search for.

Brian entered the coordinates of the cache from Geocaching.com into his smart phone's GPS function to guide our search. These turned out to be too general to be of much use, so he logged onto the website and used its "nearby" function.

This produced a list of nearby caches with the iron furnaces at the top. Clicking on the listing produced a directional arrow and a readout of the distance to the cache. This allowed us to narrow the search area considerably.

Still, the cache was small and there were lots of places it could be hidden. Though neither of us said it at the time, we were both about to give up when suddenly Brian called out "I found it!" Even though it wasn't full of treasure it did bring a sense of satisfaction, and a slight thrill.

find a cache you're supposed to log onto the site and record it, along with any comments or pictures you would like to add.

Traveling treasures

Special items called trackables may be in a cache. Each of these items has a unique code that can be looked up on geocaching.com revealing the item's mission. Usually the mission involves the trackable completing a journey, such as coast to coast, or every county in a state. The finder is asked to place the trackable in another cache that will help it continue on its journey.

There are several variations in cache types:

- **A multicache** involves several locations. Clues are hidden leading you from one location to the next until you find the final cache.
- **A mystery or puzzle cache**

requires you to solve a puzzle in order to get the coordinates.

- **A virtual cache** involves finding a specific location instead of a physical cache.
- **A webcam cache** requires you to find an existing web camera that monitors a public place and get your picture taken on the camera.
- **A reverse cache** requires you to locate a specific object instead of a hidden container.

There are also cache events, themed caches, interactive caches and other variations on the treasure hunt theme.

In order to find caches you must first visit the website or use one of the many mobile apps available on the site. By entering an address, zip code, geographic location or even a longitude and latitude, you can generate a list or map of all the caches in a designated area. Clicking on a cache will reveal the longitude and latitude where it's hidden, as well as other information and clues. Enter the coordinates into your GPS device or smart phone and you're ready to start searching.

Form and function

The Geocaching website is well designed both aesthetically and technically. The color palette, graphics and typography give the site an appropriate character, somewhere between fun and hi-tech. The navigation is laid out logically and functions well.

A guide on the homepage brings you to pages and videos that explain the geocaching concept clearly. You need to register, which is free, in order to participate. There's also a premium membership for \$30 a year, or \$10 for three months, that offers extra features. An online shop, blogs and links to social media sites round out the rest of the site.

Geocaching is a clever way to use technology to promote healthy, social and fun activities.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.