Explorations of Geocaching in the Virtual World of Second Life

Geocaching is a location-based game that has seen remarkable success since its inception in 2000. This is evidenced by the game’s growth to include over 1.5 million players and over 5 million hidden geocaches worldwide. Given its popularity, people have extended the game of Geocaching into other environments, including virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online games. For example, the web site, “SL Geocaching” has recorded geocaches placed in the virtual world of Second Life (SL) since the year 2007. Despite such extensions, we know little of how Geocaching is constructed in virtual worlds and how players actually participate.

Goal
We conducted an exploratory study of Geocaching in Second Life to understand how the game is structured and played as it compares to Geocaching in the physical world. We also wanted to understand why Geocaching in Second Life does not appear to be as popular in the physical world.

Method
To understand how geocaching works in Second Life, Geocaching sessions were carried out over a three month period. Each session consisted of 2 to 5 hour hunts for geocaches and explorations of the land and features in Second Life. Sessions consisted of individual hunts as well as group hunts, covering traditional to multi-caches. We also interviewed two geocachers in Second Life to understand their experiences.

Geocache Placement
Geocache placement in Second Life is restricted because in order to create virtual world content, you must construct it on land that you own (which can be purchased for real money). Although there is ‘public land’ in SL where one could create and place geocaches, items placed there decay after 24 hours. Thus, geocaches that might have been placed on public land may no longer exist.

Geocache Containers
Geocache placement in SL largely models Geocaching in real life, in an effort to model the game fairly closely. In this way, Geocaching is still the same basic game regardless of the change from the physical world to a virtual world. Containers are hidden near foliage or buildings, often concealed in camouflage material.

Challenges with Searching
Once arriving in an area, however, we learned that similar to real life Geocaching, geocaches can be difficult to visually spot and find.

1. To find a cache, one must adjust their camera angle and position within SL in order to see the cache. This may need to be done repeatedly as one moves throughout the environment. Such acts are not as simple as tilting one’s head in real life, given the interaction controls in SL.

2. Network and graphics lag can also hinder one’s searching efforts. If the land that a geocache is placed on is very populated, a player may ‘turn down’ their graphics to a ‘low’ setting to allow builds to load faster and reduce lag. At the same time, this means that small items may not be graphically rendered.

3. Players’ vision can also be limited to a certain range, depending on the location, where not everything is shown to a user all at once. This means that unlike Geocaching in real life, it can be more difficult to spot a likely ‘cache hide’ location from a distance.

Motivations for Searching and Hiding
The players we talked to and the forums we read indicated that Geocaching in SL provides yet another activity that people can do in the virtual world. Sometimes it relieves boredom and other times people are motivated for the small monetary rewards.

Like Geocaching in RL, many geocaches are placed to bring people to a particular location. However, in SL this may be considered more of a business strategy. Many pieces of private land are owned to setup a business such as a clothing store, bar, etc. Having a geocache at these places may increase the visitor count and chance that people will buy items. Some locations in SL are related to real life businesses and their advertisements and objects may lead you to the company’s online website. Again, this is a way of luring customers.

This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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