LOCAL HISTORY GEOCACHE ASSIGNMENT FOR DIGITAL HUMANITIES

CARLY A. KOCUREK, ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

This assignment is designed for use in an upper-level course in Digital Humanities, although it could be adapted to work in various other courses. This course fulfills upper-level general education requirements for students across the campus, most of whom are pursuing technical fields. The goal of the assignment is to introduce students to the use of the Global Positioning System (GPS) as a way of presenting historical research. By the time students reach upper-level courses, they generally have experience with scholarly writing and research methods. Creatively applying these skills to other forms of writing is a challenge central to Digital Humanities. The ability to translate scholarly research into interactive activities is a key learning outcome for this Digital Humanities course.

While the assignment presented here focuses on Chicago history, Geocaches are widespread and this assignment could readily be adapted to any geographic area. Further, the assignment could be adapted to work in other fields. For example, students in a literature course could work with locations from a novel to connect works with their settings.

GEOCACHE ACTIVITY

This activity and assignment introduces students to the creative use of GPS technology for Geocaching. Geocaching (http://www.Geocaching.com) is a type of combination recreational activity and game, in which participants use Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates to locate hidden containers. These containers, called "Geocaches" or "caches" are hidden by other participants. Geocaching is in many ways similar to other activities such as letterboxing and waymarking.

The project is carried out over two class days after which students have one week to complete an individual assignment. In the first class meeting, students are introduced to Geocaching practices and placed in groups of three to four and given instructions on how to prepare for the in-class Geocaching activity which will take place during the subsequent meeting. During this first class meeting, groups are given time to research Geocaches on and around campus using the Internet and to install Geocaching apps on smartphones, tablets, and other devices they wish to use. They are also instructed that during the subsequent meeting, they should log all caches they attempt to find, and take notes on what made caches easy or hard to find, and what kind of information made caches particularly appealing. Students also received an individual assignment, included here, to be completed in the week following the in-class activities. In the second class meeting, students work in their groups to locate Geocaches on and
around campus. During the class meeting time (one hour, fifteen minutes), groups had time to look for at least three caches.

The in-class time dedicated to learning about Geocaching and searching for Geocaches provides essential context for the associated individual assignment. Each individual student is tasked with researching and writing a virtual Geocache on an aspect of Chicago history. To complete the assignment, each student must research the history of a location in the city, locate the GPS coordinates of the chosen location by visiting the chosen location, and write a description and clues for their cache. Caches will be “virtual” in that they will be designed but not physically placed; Geocaches require ongoing maintenance which would be outside the scope of the course.

By the end of the exercise, students should have a working knowledge of Geocaching tools and understand how historical incidents are situated in specific locations in the urban landscape. The location of history in physical spaces – parks, buildings, and even roads and intersections around the city – is clear to students once they have spent time looking for Geocaches. This process helps students understand how historical research can be distributed via creative outlets like Geocaching, and also leads them to understand the intersections of history and geography. Understanding this intersection is part of a foundation of interdisciplinary skills class participants return to throughout the semester, both for subsequent individual assignments, and for the final group project, which involves completing a website on a historical Chicago novel.

NOTE ON TOOLS

While some campuses may have GPS units available to use, this assignment assumes no such access. Rather, students can use a variety of hardware including smart phones and tablets combined with apps such as Cache Me, OkMap, or the official Geocaching App for the in-class exercise that preceded the assignment. Many students have these types of devices and regularly bring them to class. Reminding students to bring any such devices in advance and then grouping them depending on hardware availability ensures everyone has the opportunity to participate without requiring that every student have their own device. Students are given instruction on how to complete the assignment without hardware; the necessary GPS coordinates can be located via Google Maps or other online tools.

INSTRUCTIONS AND RUBRIC

INSTRUCTIONS

For this assignment, create a virtual Geocache on a local historical topic. This topic must be a person or event related to the history of Chicago and should be carefully researched. Completed research should inform the narrative description of the cache. This assignment requires a minimum of 3 sources accessible through the campus library.

Do not place a physical Geocache or enter your Geocache into the official Geocaching website. Instead, compile all the content normally included for a Geocache listing in a clearly formatted Word document. Content will include:
- GPS coordinates of cache
- Size of the cache
- Any hints or clues that are appropriate
- A clever name
- Rating of cache difficulty
- Rating of terrain
- Narrative description of the cache, its geographic location within the city, and its historical importance

Be sure to review published examples of caches from Geocaching.com to inform terrain and difficulty ratings and the construction of hints and the narrative. The narrative description of the cache, explaining the historical significance of the location chosen, must be at least 500 words in length. Please think of this assignment as an opportunity to explore and exercise your creativity.

All citations should be clearly noted in the format set forth in the Chicago Manual of Style notes and bibliography citation system. A quick guide to Chicago citations is available online.

Written work should be double spaced with your name, the date, and the assignment number clearly indicated. Be sure to edit and revise carefully.

RUBRIC

While the in-class group exercises were graded only on a completion basis, the individual assignment is graded on several parameters:

- Adherence to assignment
- Spelling and grammar
- Clarity and organization of narrative
- Clarity of included information
- Research
- Originality

These parameters are at the heart of the rubric for this assignment.

A. An assignment is awarded an A if it is clearly written and engaging with no spelling or grammar errors. An assignment at this level includes relevant historical detail from appropriate research resources and creatively addresses a historical location in the city.

B. An assignment is awarded a B if it is clearly written and engaging with minimal spelling or grammar errors. An assignment at this level includes relevant historical detail from appropriate research resources and creatively addresses a historical location in the city. An assignment at this level may be very good, but display some minimal writing problems or disorganization.

C. An assignment at this level is on topic, but has persistent writing problems or is missing some minor components. An assignment at this level includes some historical detail and cites relevant sources, but would benefit from additional information. A C-level assignment creatively addresses a historical location in the city.
D. An assignment at this level is on topic, but has significant writing problems and is missing components. The assignment has some historical detail and evidences some research, but research is insufficient or incomplete. A D-level assignment addresses a historical location in the city, but may present common knowledge or otherwise fail to evidence creative engagement with the subject.

E. A failing assignment is off topic, insufficient in length, displays significant writing problems, or is significantly incomplete. The assignment neglects to include historical detail and displays little to no research.