Oppression is inherently spatial. Governments use biopolitical mechanisms such as urban zoning and prisons to keep undesirable populations fixed in place; institutions use office location to distinguish permanent from contingent faculty; houses of worship physically separate believers from infidels. These structures all classify exclusion as a topography dividing “us” from “them.” Resistance is also spatial: Rooms of one’s own and brave new worlds constitute alternate landscapes that restage the relation of the person to society. These oppositional spaces protect us from the onslaught of the myriad forms of social coding that define us as objects rather than selves.

The Graphical User Interface (or GUI for short) is a high-stakes battlefield in this struggle between the oppressed and the powers-that-be. The general term for the proliferating technologies that communicate with their human users through images rather than text, the GUI expands the concept of digital literacy to include those excluded from traditional forms of technological aptitude. Smartphones and tablets depend upon rebuses

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1 This piece was originally published on Hybrid Pedagogy. It was reviewed by Jesse Stommel and Adam Heidebrink. See Kat Lecky, “Humanizing the Interface,” Hybrid Pedagogy, 27 March 2014, http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/humanizing-interface/.
(image-words) rather than lexicons to generate meaning. Hegemony and alterity converge on their topography, which offers people the same playing field regardless of literacy level. The GUI opens a space within which dwell ever-increasing numbers of individuals from diverse classes, educational backgrounds, races, nationalities, genders, and political, sexual, or religious orientations. It forges a common identity grounded in nothing other than its shared love of this user-friendly technology. This hybrid technology opens the same world up to the excluded and powerful alike. And this world is pocket-sized: virtually anyone can own it, carry it, use it. As a pedagogical device, the GUI erodes distinctions between those privy to elite education and those without access to basic learning.

My own work studies the authority of the user in Renaissance England, which saw the birth of royally commissioned national atlases collected by the upper classes. The same era spawned a thriving industry in pocket maps that were produced cheaply and sold widely to ordinary people with no part to play in official governance. I read portable cartography as a premodern avatar of the GUI. These serviceable artifacts were marked only by bare necessities like simple icons for shires, rivers, and markets to allow even illiterate travellers to use them. Designed for heavy use by a broad audience, these maps also engendered a powerful mode of resistant pedagogy for those excluded from traditional conduits to power. The predecessors of today’s graphic interface, pocket maps taught their possessors to be agents rather than receptors: to read the signs, choose their paths, and learn about their country. Renaissance pocket maps undercut sovereign visions of England by allowing them to see their country on their own terms. Modern GUIs afford their users an open, adaptable landscape upon which they may chart their own forms of resistance, their own sense of individual sovereignty.

Take Minecraft, for example.\textsuperscript{2} It is one of seemingly countless programs that one may choose to install on the GUI, and it begins with a bare landscape and rudimentary building blocks.

\textsuperscript{2} Minecraft, https://minecraft.net/.
My four-year-old, who is only beginning to learn how to read (and cannot write without direct guidance) is already a virtuoso at writing his own world within this game. Minecraft has a basic frame and structure, but no hard limit: its terrain stretches potentially to infinitude, reconfiguring and adapting to its users’ commands. And it does not distinguish the elite from the uneducated, but rather brings the marginally literate and illiterate onto the same common ground as the programmers who enjoy this game with a highly sophisticated understanding of its code.

However, digital humanists have recently theorized the GUI as a mechanism of hegemonic repression that forces its users into pre-existing epistemes. They challenge scientific discourses that grant creative agency to the user while defining technology as a tool whose affordances facilitate the user’s comprehension of and action in their environment. Instead, these digital humanists interpret the interface as the newest layer of cultural oppression weighing down a human consciousness already burdened by the overarching nexus of power that subjugates the individual to society. Some critics have even stripped the users of their personhood: Johanna Drucker asserts, “the very term ‘user’ has to be jettisoned — since it implies an autonomy and agency independent of the circumstances of cognition — in favor of the ‘subject’ familiar from critical theory.” Unfortunately, the familiar subject of theory is the one subjected / subjugated to the social structure, who collapses into preexisting spatial classifications. These theoretical moves often dehumanize both this image-driven interface and its users.

This dehumanization of the user stems from the current drive to theorize digital humanities. For instance, Alan Liu explains that the field is the primary beneficiary of the post-May 1968 rise of cultural theory that defined humanity as “congenitally structural, epistemic, class based, identity-group based

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(gendered, racial, ethnic), and so on." Although this critical move reveals the investments of the digital humanities in interrogating social inequities, it also reduces the individual to a mere element of the massive intersecting networks of cultural formation that Liu describes as “the total machine of historical, material, and social determinism that is both the condition and the dilemma of modernity.” It defines digital humanities as a method that views people as products rather than producers. The same move that makes DH speak more intimately to the interests of humanities scholars paradoxically strips this field of its humanity.

The hegemony of the digital world becomes simply another panopticon containing a human mass living in quiet desperation. Mark Sample’s post mourns the death of the fugitive in a media culture so panoptic that it is impossible to evade. Instead, Sample explains, “in a world of digital, synchronized communication we have what amounts to infinite tracking, deep searching, and persistent indexing. Of everyone.” From this perspective, the proliferation of information technologies that gave birth to the realm of digital humanities simultaneously killed the independent spirit of the people who created that space.

Perhaps on some level Sample is mourning the movement of this once-marginal field into the center of academe. Until recently, digital humanists were outlaws of the system; now, they shape it. But this very movement of digital humanities from the periphery to the center signals the basic and incessant cultural effect of resistance. Antonio Gramsci argued that hegemony is always shaped by those who oppose it: as those excluded by a society voice their malcontent, they shift the conduits of power in their favor until they in turn pull the strings—at least for a moment, since by the time it is recognized as hegemony it is

5 Ibid., 500.
always already slipping toward the interests of other rising subaltern groups. The fugitive of hegemony is fundamentally social: she captures our collective imagination when she refuses to slink into oblivion. She is the outlaw central to juridical reinscription, the criminal who is queen. We love fugitives not for their anonymity, but for their power to change society by carving their own place into it.

For this reason, the move of the digital humanities from the periphery to the center is not tragic but promising, because the field is gaining the power to remap the very ways we think about the human. Digital humanists should not clothe themselves in the tired theoretical habits that subsume the individual under repressive social constellations. The new hegemony of digital humanities in academe exposes a broader readiness to shed current conceptions of the humanities and explore new realms of thought about the ordinary person’s agency vis-à-vis the pedagogical and the political. Why should digital humanists conform to existing discourses, when the field of DH is fecund precisely because it does not fit those outmoded categories?

As digital humanists move into the center of the debate about what a humanities education is and does, they have the freedom to redefine the hegemonic theories binding it to the past. GUIs are the perfect proving ground for this retheorization: they authorize the self (the fugitive par excellence of the dreary world of unrelenting compartmentalized labor) to escape her subjection to totalizing systems via a rhizomatic engagement with a new topography of the common that encourages free play. Michel de Certeau complicates producer-driven ideas about how information shapes its recipients by highlighting how ordinary consumers repurpose media to serve their own interests. The GUI exemplifies this model of eccentric consumption. Although the interface constrains its user to a certain set of actions, that

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set is so expansive that it affords remarkable freedom within a very large frame. Since the icons shaping the rhetoric are gestural rather than comprehensive, they invite meaning rather than invoking it. The GUI invites us to take pleasure in exploring its world, clicking on links that strike our fancy and wandering through strange landscapes. In the process, our enjoyment translates into a cognitive process that blocks our complete assimilation into any superstructure. The “we” produced by the interface is not monolithic, since the individualistic nature of various users’ relations to the GUI cannot be reduced to that of a singular “subject.”

Renaissance pocket maps show us that the fugitive and the outlaw are not the last bastion against the postmodern annihilation of the self in service to the subject. They reveal that there have always been many ways of looking at the world, and the perspective of the outlaw has often vied with (and even become) that of the monarch. Giant maps were panoptic, but in everyday life they were crowded out by the tiny maps that proliferated in the nation’s retail bookstalls. Similarly, the ideological place of the modern subject is shaped by systems that put Orwellian models to shame; but myriad individuals create pockets of space within that place that weaken its very infrastructure. Yes, “they” can track “us,” but that very phrase creates a common ground for countless fugitive users united by little else than our shared resistance to oppression. Our dismissal of those who would contain us marginalizes repressive power systems: we decentralize the center that would subjugate us. And this “us” is potent because it celebrates individual differences rather than flattening all users into a single identifiable populace. The shared world of the GUI creates strange bedfellows: it is, after all, the place where the politics of far left and extreme right converge in their shared revulsion of surveillance and censorship. As Liu points out, the field of DH has the unique potential to forge new lines of communication between the academic study of the humanities and the digital media upon which a shifting and riven public inscribes its real-world concerns.
Resisting the dehumanization of the interface thus entails the paradoxical return of the concept of the user: the autonomous, absentminded, bodied entity who learns haptically by touching the icons that beckon to him, who forges his own curricula extemporaneously between bouts of Candy Crush, who learns as much or more about the world when he digresses as when he stays on his intended track. In the classroom, the quotidian nature of ordinary resistance might translate into a rejection of the professorial mistrust that often attends technology, paired with an open invitation for students to click the hyperlinks, Google terminology, and search for visualization aids without external prompts. If the user is central to the pedagogical experience of the interface, then a student should not be subject to someone else’s usage maps. They will likely Snapchat in class; but they will also undoubtedly find ways through the subject matter that will teach them the value of developing their unique authority within (and without) that topic.

For many of us, the ideal endpoint of a humanities education is to train our students to step into society as active and engaged citizens of the world. This goal is fundamentally pragmatic, of course, since the good life in this case necessitates the transition from uncritical subjecthood to civic engagement, to action in the world. Humanist pedagogy thus works best when it aims not for transcendence but utility, and for lived experience rather than abstraction. The field of digital humanities is the terrain upon which we may best embrace this prosaic, everyday approach to humanism. As students become users rather than passive receptacles, they become fugitives of the hegemony in their rejection of others’ dictates (including those concerning the “proper” pedagogical use of technology). They shed the strictures of subjection to step playfully into the fullness of humanity. For students as well as scholars, the GUI maps this path into the pleasure of the unknown. The interface teaches us all to leave behind the baggage of what we should be and do and say, and simply embrace our individual roles in the creation of brave new worlds.
Bibliography