Jewish Life in Berlin: Music and Popular Culture in the 1920s

1. Team Members

Jasmine Yuan is a Media Arts & Sciences major at Wellesley College. She primarily took the responsibility in concept development and ideation, research, material collection, creating assets, and developing the final prototype.

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2. Concept Overview

The Weimar Republic was the interwar period from 1919 to 1933 that represented a flourishing in creativity in music and the arts, with Berlin as a creative center in Europe. The "Golden Twenties" marked a time of experimentation into new art forms and ideas, but it was also a time of political unrest and a tense economic and social situation.

The Jewish Life in Berlin project is a web-based interactive exhibition that showcases the cultural significance of Jews in music, art and popular culture in the 1920s. It explores different aspects of Berlin's music scene during the Weimar Republic through multiple locations significant to Jewish life. Several musical genres that are explored include music performed in the cabaret, the theater, the symphony, and liturgical music. This project takes a gamification approach; users unlock archival materials and locations by answering trivia questions about cultural artifacts and performances. The gamification approach is designed to provide an

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incentive for users to browse and discover new material at their own pace. Trivia questions serve to engage younger audiences, as well as contribute educational value to the material.

The goal of the project is to allow audiences to learn more about Berlin's historic and modern music spaces, listen to Jewish music, and to learn about Jewish life and popular culture in 1920s Berlin. Our intended audience includes English speakers who are interested in learning more about music, music history, and ethnomusicology.

3. Background Research

In the early stages of project ideation, we looked into the book "Passing Illusions: Jewish Visibility in Weimar Germany" by Kerry Wallach, which provides insight into the presentation of Jewishness during the time period in Germany. Wallach examines constructs of German-Jewish identity, as well as the reasons for concealing and revealing this identity through performance, cultural products, and other public displays. The Weimar Republic represented an opening up of creative possibilities as well as a closing in fueled by nationalism and the end of the war. With the renewed sense of identity in the Jewish community in the 1920s came an increase in hostility and anti-Semitic sentiments. The ideas presented in this book helped shift my project direction into representing more material related to cultural displays in public performance rather than having Jewish music as a disconnected entity from Jewish visibility.

"Three-Way Street: Jews, Germans, and the Transnational" is a collection of essays that examine the transnational identity of German-Jews. Rosenfeld's essay "Between Memory and Normalcy: Synagogue Architecture in Postwar Germany" discusses the significance of the architectural history of synagogues and how these buildings of worship reflect community identity. The building's construction is shaped by these postwar cultural and societal trends. Weiss's essay "Klezmer in the New Germany: History, Identity, and Memory" explores the connections of traditional Klezmer music to Jewish settlements and the differences in identities and associations with native German-Jews. The music is significant due to its politically charged nature, cultural

ties, and public reception in Germany. These ideas helped inform my project by illustrating the deep connections between cultural identity and the German-Jewish music scene. We intend the Jewish Life in Berlin project to explore these social issues and cultural ties, as well as how they are represented through performance and entertainment culture.

In later stages of the project, we reviewed several models to help inform the structuring of content for our project as well as the design for our user interface. The docuverse section of our project takes inspiration from Ted Nelson, who first coined the term in 1974. The Docuverse refers to an Internet hyperlinked library of interconnected documents. It was proposed as an addition to file transfer protocol systems and the World Wide Web, designed to allow access to digital resources across different protocols. Similarly, our docuverse is a web of documents that are spatially arranged by date.

Since we wanted maps to be a potential component of our user interface, we researched storytelling tools that involved these location-based spatial representations. We looked at the TimeMapper tool, which combined a map and a timeline representation, but we wanted to see if there was a way to intersperse these representations within a narrative. We examined projects created using the arcGIS StoryMaps technology. This technology allows one to create a story using different map markers. Narrative text, images, and different multimedia can be attached to locales, and the map can be integrated within a larger story. We found that much of the materials we collected are tied to locations, so we could similarly use a map representation to tell a story. We ended up not using the StoryMaps tool because the maps in this technology lack in terms of interactive components. Because we wanted our users to engage with the maps, we decided to utilize other prototyping tools that did not contain these limitations.
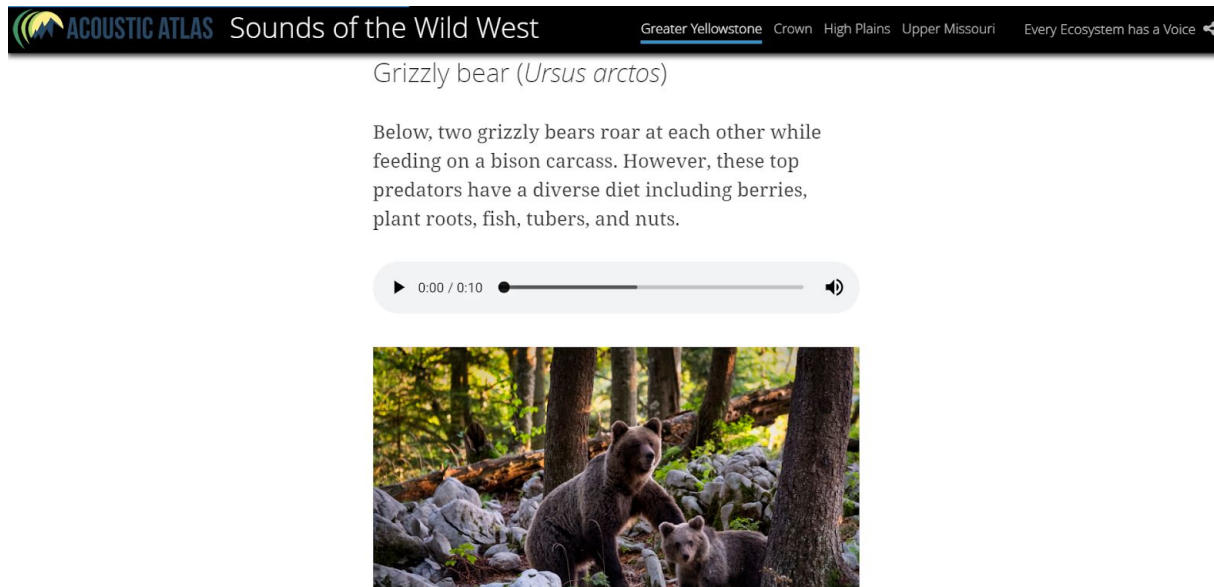
Figure 1. Screencap of a narrative section of "Sounds of the Wild West", an audio tour of Montana's ecosystems created using the StoryMaps technology. Audio is tied to an animal in a particular location (Greater Yellowstone area). Although we did not end up using this technology, we took inspiration from the integration of maps with narrative components of this audio tour.

4. Project Development

We went through an iterative process to create our final digital prototype. Initially, we were given several possible project options. Working with museum4punkt0 was one of the given options, and we selected the Jewish Life in Berlin in the 1920s topic that was suggested by them. Since we found the scope of this topic to be very broad, we chose to focus on Jewish music in the Weimar Republic because it is an area that is richly connected to multiple places in Berlin, social and political themes, and has held great cultural influence.

Early Stages of Concept Development

After narrowing down the topic into a more specific focus, we began creating several sketches on paper for potential user interfaces and forms of user navigation (Fig. 2).
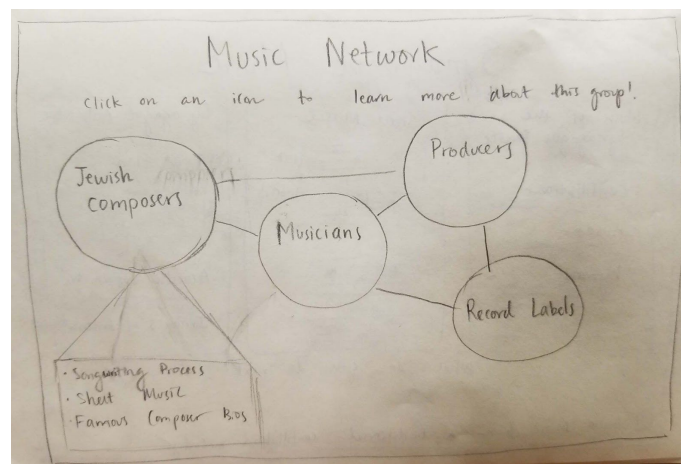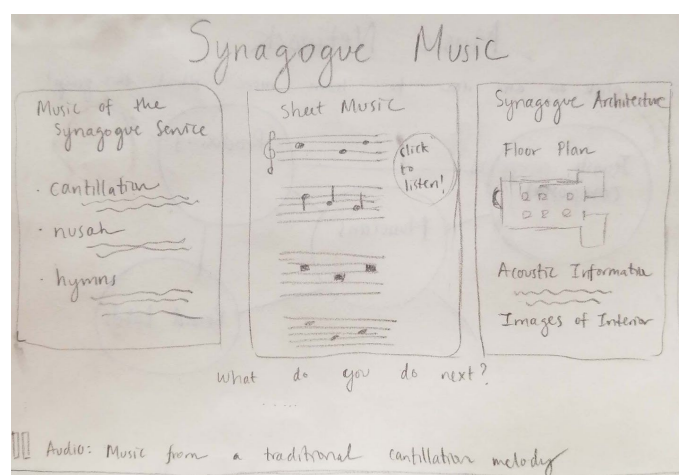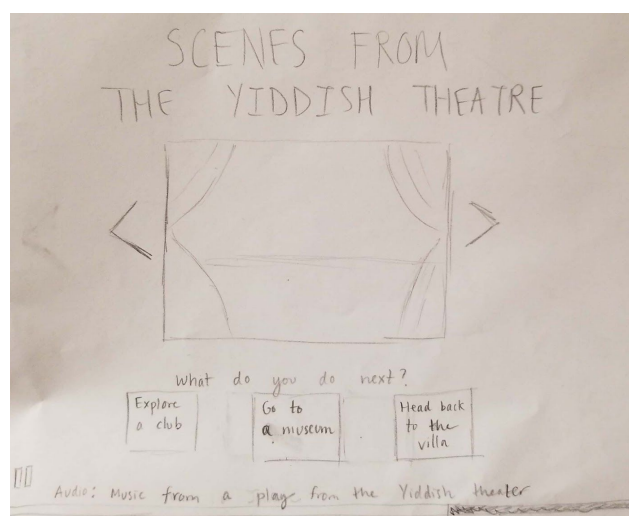
Figure 2. Sketches created during the earliest stages of development. The early sketches show storytelling features, with options for the user to select their own journey through the material ("What do you do next?").

After further deliberation regarding the interface and structure of the website, we wanted to include both a map representation and a timeline representation in our project. The location-based spatial map representation would demonstrate connections between music and place. The timeline representation would show the impact of the cultural forces and social issues of Berlin in the 1920s on the music scene and the lives of figures in music. For example, the Metropol-Theater, located in the Mitte district of Berlin, was a central venue for showcasing music from Jewish theater productions and operettas. Many theater works contained themes and satire that were relevant to the political climate during that time.

First Journey Map

The concept behind the first journey map was to have the interface be presented as a cabaret scene, where nodes in the network are visually represented by tables in the cabaret setting. Nodes in the network can be key musical figures, musical genres, or themes. The home page contains a navigation bar with the home tab (the cabaret setting), the map tab (a map of music spaces in Berlin), and a timeline tab (a timeline with relevant contextual information and media).
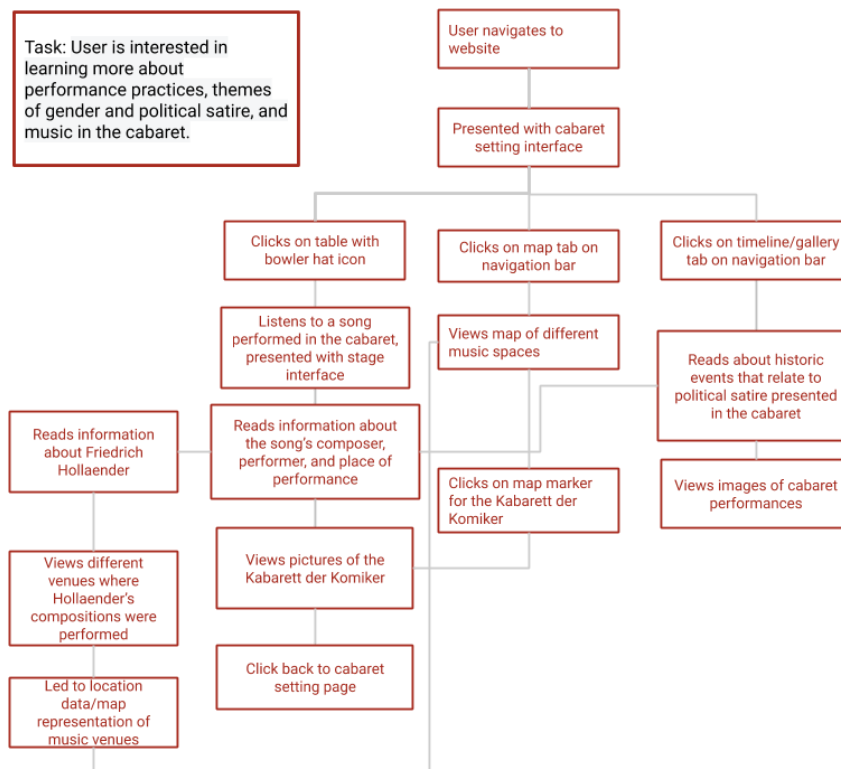

Figure 3. Initial journey map. Our final solution deviated from this journey map by having the map representation be the home page instead of the cabaret setting. This way, it would be easier for the viewer to recognize that material from other locations on the map can be explored.

Material Collection

We dedicated several weeks to finding and collecting archival materials. For material related to public performance, we originally intended to include floor plans, photos of the exterior and interior views of mapped locations, videos of performances, critic reviews, and advertisements.

We also wanted to include letters and correspondence, publications related to social commentary, and sheet music. Some difficulties we ran into included barriers to accessing material, as well as the inability to find certain materials that were relevant and fit our criteria. For example, we could not find many documents pertaining to the Comedian Harmonists, which we originally intended to be central figures in our project due to their numerous connections to multiple venues and people. Most of our material were images— photographs or lithographic prints of music venues and architectural features. Some additional types of material we were able to collect included several newspaper articles, advertisements, music scores, and music files.

Some of the key archives and databases where we collected resources from include the Europeana collections, Leo Baeck Institute Archives, and the Architecture Museum of the Technical University of Berlin (Architekturmuseum). We also spoke to Carol Lubkowski, the Wellesley College music librarian, who helped locate several databases we used to find newspapers and CD liner notes. These archives included the Naxos Music Library and the Ethnic American Newspapers from the Balch Collection. The liner notes provided contextual information about the music, and we used newspapers from the Balch Collection in the docuverse for the final prototype.

First Digital Prototype

Figure 4. Stage view screens from the first iteration of the digital prototype.

For the first iteration of our digital prototype, our idea was to have music venues be representative of different themes or areas of Berlin's Jewish music scene. Here, we had the Metropol-Theater represent the theater scene during the Weimar era. We had pictures from different areas and perspectives of the building represent different types of material. Pictures of the building's exterior and surroundings would contain contextual information about the Jewish community. Pictures of the foyer would show promotional material. The view facing the stage would have materials about themes present, historical precedents, and musical genres. Views facing the audience would contain information about key figures.

We used Invision Studio to navigate between different pages, but we found our prototype screens to be too static. We decided that having old photographs of music venues as backgrounds for material was not engaging, and it did not provide an incentive for users to further explore the material. There was no unifying element that linked different venues or made connections between the material attached to each locale. In order to create a more inventive and interesting product, we decided to backtrack and go back to paper prototyping.

Further Development

We thought that having an interactive map representation of Berlin as our interface would help create a centralized main page and unify our location-based materials. We had a meeting where we geotagged different locations of significance to Jewish life so we could place location markers on the map. We thought that doing some form of a game approach would help incentivize the user to further engage with the material. At this stage, we had not fully decided how the gamification aspect would be integrated in our product, so we made several sketches of potential user interfaces.
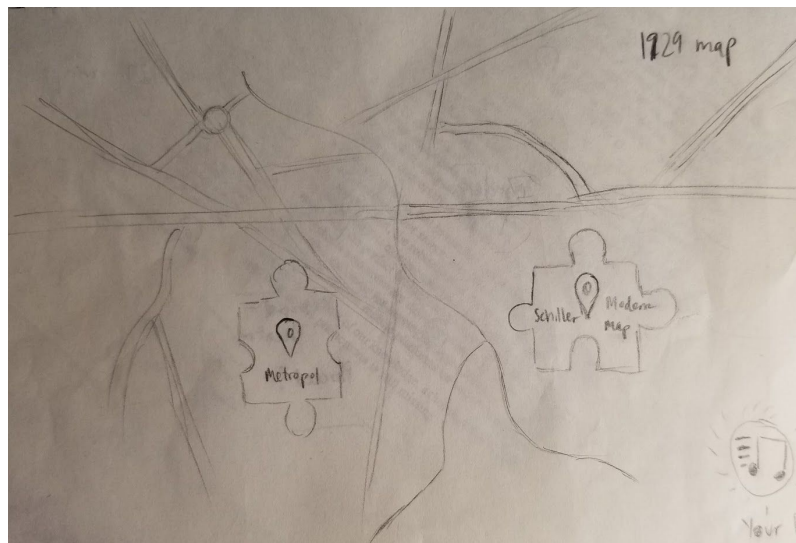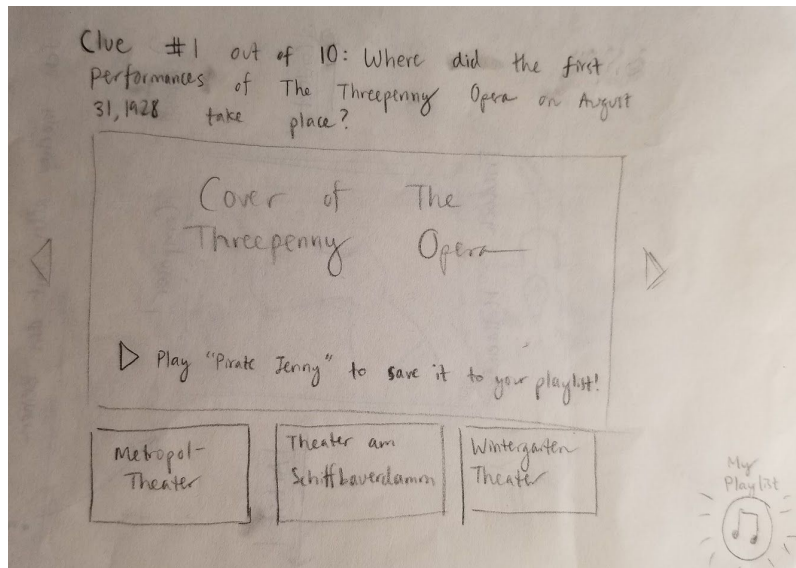
Figure 5. Two sketches on paper created in later stages of development. These contain game elements: trivia questions and "unlocking" locations as puzzle pieces.
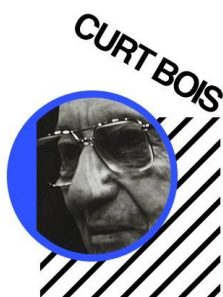

Figure 6 (left). Digital sketch. Contains a preliminary Bauhaus color scheme and icons for a page for a figure. We chose to integrate Bauhaus design elements because the Bauhaus movement began during the beginning of the

Weimar Republic. We decided that Bauhaus design principles of simplicity, a clean typeface, and the use of primary colors would contribute to visual clarity and an effective minimalist aesthetic.
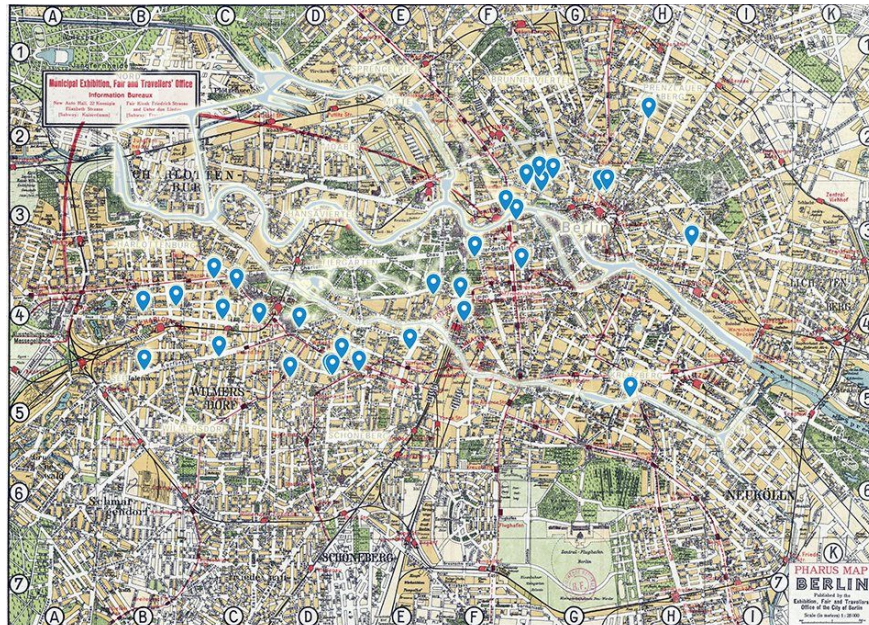

Figure 7 (left). Sketch created in later stages of development. Map markers of geotagged locations are overlaid on the 1929 map of Berlin.

Final Prototype

For our final prototype, we took the same idea of the location-based representation but changed the overall approach and interface. The main page of the prototype is an interactive 1929 map of Berlin. It contains the map markers of our geotagged locations. It implements our concept of the gamification approach with trivia questions attached to each location. Users must answer the trivia questions correctly in order to unlock those locations and explore more material. Users can also add songs to a music collection using Bauhaus-style geometric shapes. Our docuverse, a web of documents, is a timeline-based representation.

Figure 8 (left). The top portion of the final prototype landing page. This is part of the screen that the user is first greeted with.

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5. Enabling Technologies

We used Adobe Photoshop to create digital sketches in the later stages of development. For our final prototype, after setting design guidelines, we utilized Adobe Illustrator to create a style guide with the color scheme, typography, map marker icons, and buttons (Fig. 9). We then used it to create shapes and design individual assets and pages. We had a shared Dropbox folder in which we uploaded Illustrator files so we could collaborate on files within the folder. For our first digital prototype, we first attempted to use InVision Studio to create assets, but found it difficult to collaborate among team members on the same project.
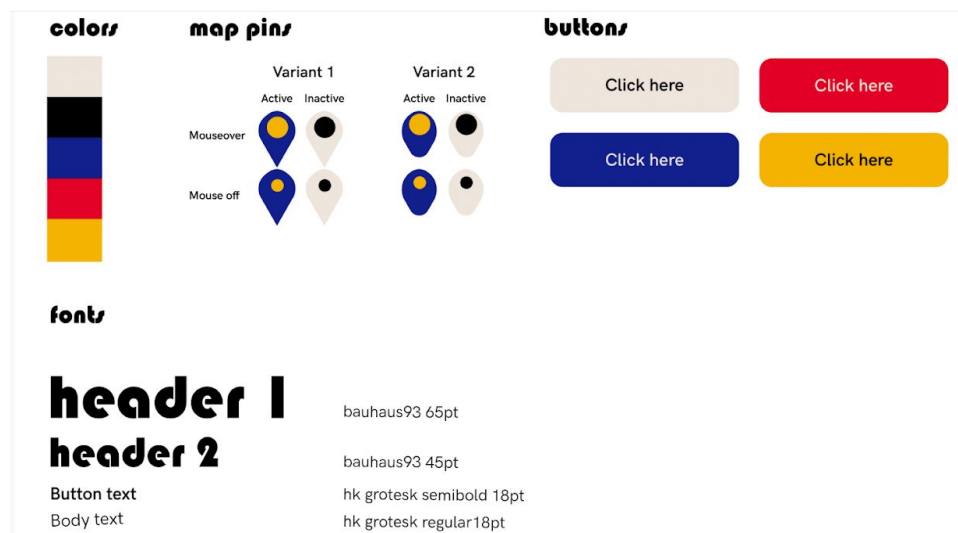

Figure 9. Design guidelines created in Illustrator.

We used InVision to implement actions and connections between different pages. The limitations with InVision involved the inability to play audio or display animated features or transitions. Additionally, assets cannot be updated within InVision itself, so every time we changed a page in Illustrator we had to reupload it to InVision. A new page must be created and uploaded for each individual action in the prototype. With InVision, it is also difficult to simulate a personalized experience for users, as it does not store data or allow for dynamic or randomized material

generation. Despite these drawbacks, we used InVision because it allowed a way to easily simulate button clicks and hovering features, and to connect different screens together. We also had familiarity with using the platform for other prototypes. Time did not allow for more elaborate web app development.

6. Journey Map

The prototype contains six main "views": map view (Fig. 10), location view (Fig. 11), document view (Fig. 12), trivia view (Fig. 13), docuverse view (Fig. 14), and music view (Fig. 15).

The website begins with a landing page, which contains a brief overview and some information about the project. After the user selects the "launch" button, they will be brought to the "map view" (Fig. 10).

Figure 10. Map view

1. User is presented with "map view" (Fig. 10): a 1920s map of Berlin with two unlocked locations - animated blue map markers, along with locked locations - greyed out map markers. We chose to have the Metropol-Theater and the Kabarett der Komiker be the first two unlocked markers because we had a greater variety of collected material that were attached to those locations.
    a. User clicks on zoom-in and zoom-out icons to examine map in greater detail.
    b. User selects one unlocked location marker (here, the Metropol-Theater) and is presented with "location view" (Fig. 11): a page containing the title of the location, information about the location, a gallery of active documents, and a song

represented by a Bauhaus-style geometric shape. The song is randomly selected from the archive's collection of music, and new shapes will regenerate with new songs when the user continues to browse the material.

Figure 11. Location view

    i.   User clicks on an active document and is presented with the "document view" (Fig. 12): a larger view of the document, a short description, and metadata

        1.   Contains a link back to "location view" for the location that the document originally appeared on
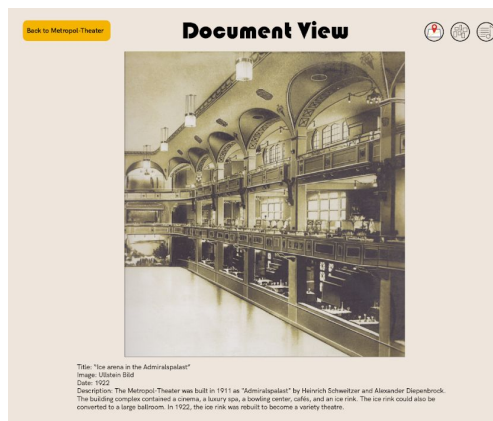

Figure 12. Document view

    ii.   If the user clicks on the Bauhaus shape, a song starts playing (with play/pause and volume controls); the song is added to the music collection, which is indicated by an "added to music" button. Selecting the "added to music" button leads the user directly to the "music view".

c.   If an inactive (locked) location is clicked (here, the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm), user is presented with "trivia view" (Fig. 13): a trivia question

that relates to the location that it is tied to, materials that contain hints or are relevant to the question, and multiple answer choices;

      i.   If incorrect answer is selected, message provides contextual information and/or more hints that lead to the correct answer

      ii.   If correct answer is selected, message indicates that the location is unlocked (no longer disabled), gives information about the material, and provides a link to the new unlocked location.
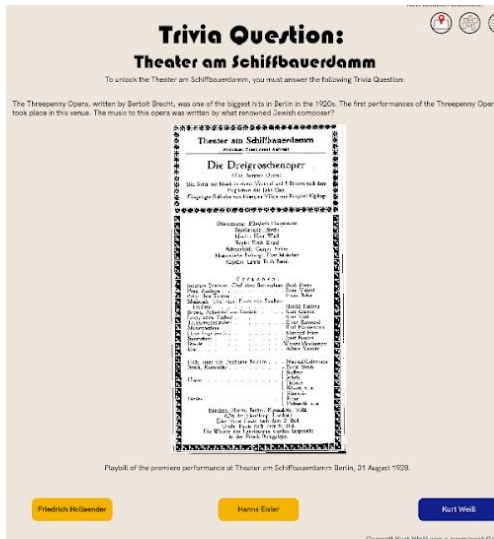

Figure 13. Trivia view

2.   User clicks the docuverse button at the top of the page in order to examine other documents and goes to "docuverse view" (Fig. 14)

    a.   A full timeline appears, with all documents organized by year—inactive or active depending on what locations user has unlocked in trivia/map

    b.   If an active document is clicked, user is presented with "document view"

    c.   If an inactive document is clicked, a message will appear stating that user must explore other locations in the "map view" in order to unlock the document
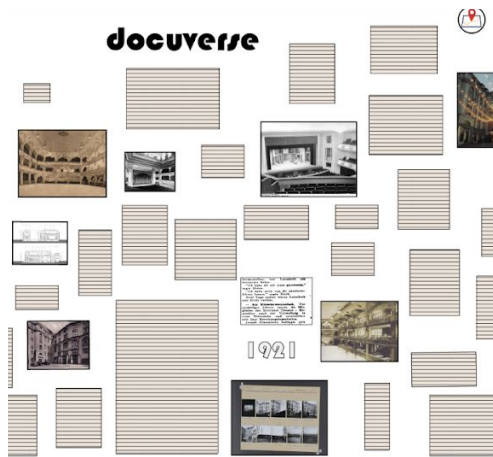
Figure 14. Docuverse view

3. User clicks the music note button at the top of the page and goes to "music view" (Fig. 15): a dynamically generated Bauhaus-style arrangement or poster of collected songs represented by shapes. The "poster" is randomly generated for each user, and the user's session is tracked by cookies.

   a. If shape is clicked on, user is presented with information about the song: composer, artist, lyrics, etc.

   b. User has an option to "download" and "share" the poster image and/or the song collection as a list
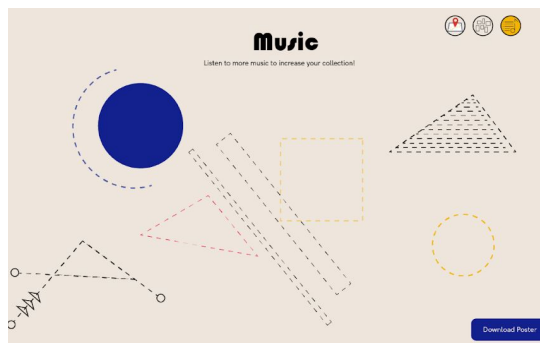

Figure 15. Music view

7. Future Directions

We would like to continue attaching material and trivia questions to the rest of the geotagged locations. We intend to provide more contextual information about other aspects of Jewish life. This information would give insight into the political, social, economic and living situations of

Jews during the time. Furthermore, we would like to create more connections between different materials, thus making the music network more prominent.

Although we used a Bauhaus-inspired color scheme and geometric shapes in the "music view" (Fig. 14), we would like to integrate more of the Bauhaus design elements into our project. We want to emphasize the Bauhaus as a visual identity as well as an educational movement.
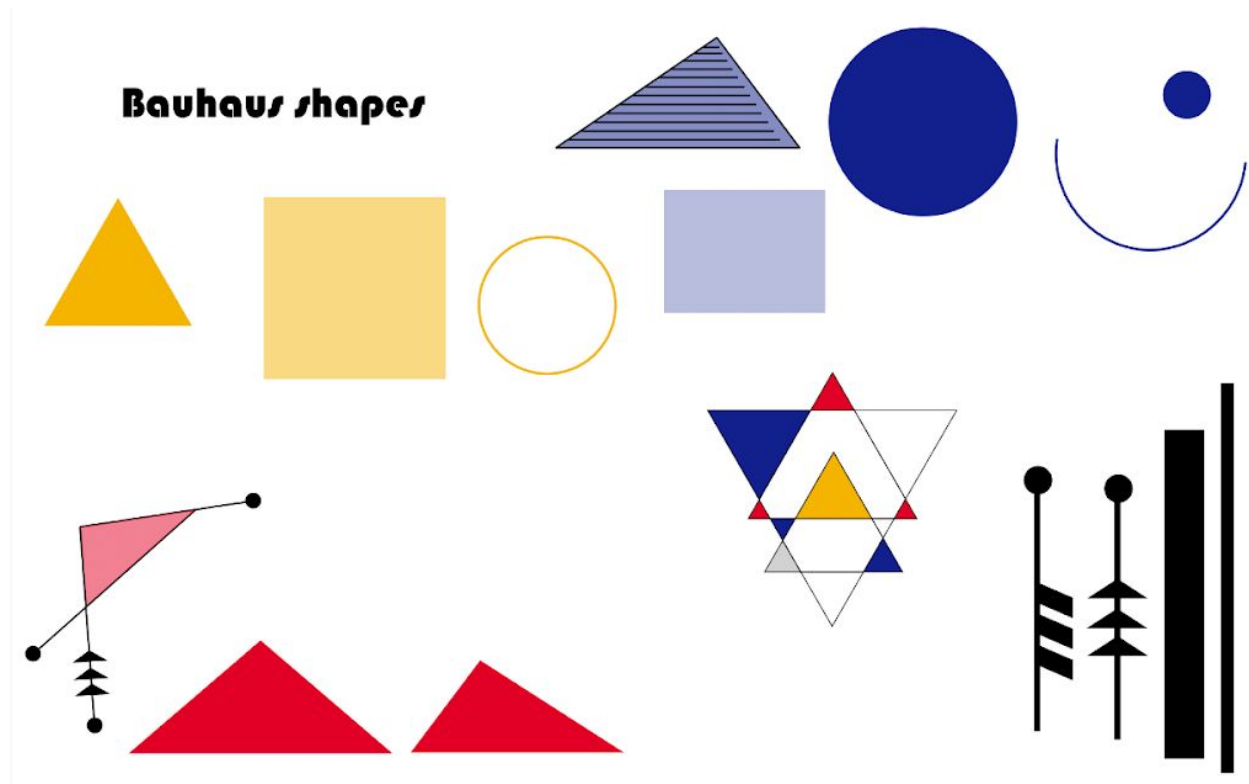

Figure 16. Geometric shapes inspired by the Bauhaus movement. We would have liked to integrate more of these in future iterations of this prototype.

For the docuverse, we would like to add filtering mechanisms, so users can group materials by metadata such as category, people referenced, or date. We would also like to add sorting mechanisms to the music collection so users are able to compare music by a certain composer, performer, time performed, or genre.

Additionally, we are interested in potentially integrating our project with the museum4punkt0 Augmented Reality (AR) project.[1] Our project has an interactive map with places of significance to Jewish music and culture in Berlin. One possibility with our interactive map is to have a transparency feature where the map markers are overlaid on a contemporary Google map, instead of the historic map. We could possibly connect this idea by including music spaces as part of the AR project that Berlin residents can explore, to see how these physical locations have changed or not changed over time. Visiting these sites in person will allow users of the AR app to have a greater appreciation for the historical events and performances that once took place in these venues, and users will be able to engage with the location-based material in our project in a more informed way. As the AR project allows people to examine historical layers of the city, our project adds to these layers; Berlin residents will be able to experience their city through the lens of jewish culture and music.

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