



# Hyper-Driven

What if you could use the Web to travel to a city, explore its streets, and get lost in buildings — and travel back through 800 years of its history? Thanks to UCLA Associate Professor of Germanic Languages and Jewish Studies Todd Presner, you can — at least in Berlin. The self-described “techie-humanist” is the mind behind Hypermedia Berlin, an online geodatabase that enables visitors to virtually explore the famous German city layer by layer and era by era. On the drawing board: Hypermedia Los Angeles, Lima and Rome.

*By Judy Lin*

**Q: How did you come up with Hypermedia Berlin?**

A: The idea came to me in graduate school, at Stanford during the dot-com boom. It was an amazingly interesting cultural moment in the mid- to late-'90s, with so much excitement about the Web. This came together with ideas I had while doing research in Berlin. I was trying to think of a way to understand a city space that seemed to me to be haunted — that is to say, many parts of the city's past exist in the present, but you couldn't really piece them together. You would recognize that this building doesn't go with that building; this plaza doesn't go with that train station.

**Q: How did you make it happen?**

A: I was teaching a course on Berlin when I came to UCLA in 2002 and I realized that many of the students had never been there and wouldn't possibly have the experience that I had. Just reading a book on Berlin wasn't going to convey this complexity. So I began making models and drawing ways of overlaying the past, basically thinking of maps that were laid on top of each other, and a way for students to navigate information geographically and, later on, contribute information. I've also been blessed with a very skilled team in the Center for Digital Humanities, where most of the technical development has been done.

**Q: This is more than a stand-alone platform?**

A: We've created an interface that works with Google Maps. Students can begin in the present, using satellite map imagery provided by Google. If they want historical information, they use our maps and system to navigate back through 800 years of Berlin. We're also putting all our maps into Google Earth, so that the general public can also experiment with manipulating time-stamped information.

**Q: How does it work?**

A: I log in and create a user profile, information about me as well as all the groups that I'm a part of. The database is always giving you material based on your latitude and longitude, as well as your zoom level and what group you happen to be in. When you're at a particular point — shown as a marker or polygon on the screen — you get information for that place.



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**Q: And moving around in time?**

A: All of the maps have now been geo-referenced and overlaid. So present-day Berlin overlays 1947 Berlin, which overlays 1650 Berlin, and so forth. For example, if you're looking at a river in 1650 Berlin, you can go to satellite imagery in present-day Google Maps and see 1650 Berlin as a tiny hamlet lined up beneath 2008. You can literally watch how things are evolving over time.

**Q: There's also a social networking aspect to the site.**

A: If you register for the Berlin site, you join a general Berlin group or you can form your own group and curate your group's own content. We can support hundreds of different groups.

**Q: What sorts of content can be added, and by whom?**

A: Hypermedia Berlin is a Web 2.0 teaching tool because users participate, create, upload, comment on and network with one another. You can create your own group and curate the group's material. A student can add "My Trip to Berlin," put all their pictures up and geo-reference them. We also have more formal contributors like the Wende Museum in Culver City, which has a fascinating trove of cultural material about Germany during the Cold War.

**Q: Have you discovered new things about Berlin from the site?**

A: Yes. It's a powerful research and discovery tool. For example, I discovered something interesting in the vicinity of a church that exists today [but] on the 1772 map, there were two Jewish quarters close by. By using these maps, going back and forth between them, I see that what is now a parking lot used to be the courtyard where one of these Jewish quarters used to exist. I actually traveled there to see if there is any remnant of the Jewish quarter, and there's not. You have to go to 1772 to find it. I don't know any other way you could discover this. The physical maps tend to be kept in archives and are very fragile. You can't use them, let alone overlay them.

**Q: You're standing on the edge of the digital world, but you've also done traditional academic work.**

A: I published two books this past year, *Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains, and Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*. I don't think they're conventional books by any means, but they definitely look like traditional scholarship. *Mobile Modernity* is actually relevant to the Hypermedia Berlin project, as many of my ideas were written up first in the book.

**Q: Do you find non-traditional forms of teaching and research more interesting?**

A: Doing non-traditional things is definitely exciting for me. Since the

mid-'90s with the public development of the Web, you have new venues for scholarly production. New modes of authorship like blogging. New ways of scholarly dissemination. So the ways in which your work is actually disseminated is far beyond traditional academic communities.

**Q: How much of a techie do you consider yourself to be?**

A: I have a Facebook account. I have an avatar, but I've never really gotten into Second Life — I'm too busy — and I don't really blog actively, though I have been known to blog. I consider myself a techie-humanist, a humanist who has interests in using technologies.

**Q: Does Web-based teaching and research challenge academia?**

A: There's still a certain amount of resistance to new forms of Web-based scholarship. The humanities has prided itself for very long on the individual genius in the archive discovering something, writing it up, spending years creating a printed monograph. Now you have a Web-based geodatabase. For people who may be more traditional-minded, it looks odd. We also have many more collaborative projects today: geographers working with computer scientists working with historians working with literary scholars. The humanities are changing.

**Q: Are students learning differently from your site — or better?**

A: Students at universities internationally are using this. We have a tremendous amount of information available to us now online. Information navigation and information literacy are two of the critical things that students have to learn. If we're enabling our students to enter the new world of the 21st century, we have to equip them with the tools to navigate and critically analyze the dizzying amount of information out there. We want them to learn traditional things — history, geography, urban studies — but they're learning in a more rich and contextualized way.

**Q: What's next?**

A: We've created hypercities.com, starting on a Los Angeles project going back to the 18th century up through the present. The collaborative team includes UCLA History Professor Jan Reiff and Architecture Professor Diane Favro, along with USC Professor Phil Ethington. We're not just an academic project. We're also in the L.A. community.

## Ich Bin Ein Berliner

Want to see Hypermedia Berlin in action? Visit <http://www.berlin.ucla.edu/hypermedia/>. And for more on the concept of hyper-exploration, visit [www.hypercities.com](http://www.hypercities.com).

