At the beginning of my course on German history at Stanford University last fall, each student drew an identity at random that he or she would keep throughout the quarter—creating a unique historical character who was born in 1900 and lived through Germany’s tumultuous 20th century. Through weekly posts to individual pages on the course Web site, students researched the texture of everyday life, untangled pivotal events, and weighed questions of humanity. Although fictional, the lives that the students developed offered a unique entree into the past, stimulating their curiosity and critical thinking about history.

Each student had one sentence to go on with his or her character’s birthplace, gender, religion, and parents’ occupations. Characters were born into all walks of life: the son of a prostitute in Berlin, the daughter of Jewish banker in Munich, the son of East Prussian nobility. The rest was up to students to decide. I gave weekly assignments to help structure their posts, requesting diary entries for key dates or eyewitness responses to certain events, and would note any historical inaccuracies in their writings. But I did not interfere with individual choices as to how the avatars would feel, live and act, placing just three restrictions on them: The characters could not die or be otherwise incapacitated, leave Germany permanently, or change the course of history.

That open-endedness engendered a sense of ownership, fostering seriousness and self-correction. Students showed humility in their approach to the material; in the words of one senior, "I kept asking myself, Is this realistic?" Perhaps more than anything, the high standards of the class Web site helped sustain the quality of the work and a productive exchange of ideas.

Over the quarter, the avatars lived through two world wars and the cold war, experiencing monarchy, democracy, fascism, and communism. They each saw Hitler at the Beer Hall Putsch and had to decide whether to vote for him a decade later. They were at the Berlin Wall when it went up in 1961 and came down in 1989. Building upon course readings, they had conversations with the writer Joseph Roth in Weimar Berlin, with the Holocaust perpetrators of Police Battalion 101, and with estranged family and friends on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain. They witnessed and, in some cases, participated in the violence of Germany’s 20th century, even as they lived at the pinnacle of Germany’s cultural and economic achievements. The characters also reflected upon the meaning of it all as they met together at the close of the century.

As the avatars became increasingly three-dimensional, the project resonated beyond the classroom. Students endowed them with personality quirks, discussed them with friends and family, and incorporated their own histories. One based his character's persecution and emigration from Nazi Germany on his own family's experience; another wrote his grandfather into his story. They also explored individual interests. A history major, prompted by election campaigning over Proposition 8 in California, had her character outed as gay in the Third Reich; she researched the treatment of
homosexuals in Germany's successive regimes, integrating details like the number of gay bars in East and West Berlin into her weekly updates.

Students sent their characters on divergent paths. Some plunged head long into radical events and ideologies; others "took the path of least resistance" and "just let history pass [them] by." Some characters' values and personalities stayed consistent; others took "fluctuating, elastic political positions." Some characters spent their whole lives in one place; others ranged far and wide—a colonist to Southwest Africa, Jewish émigrés to Britain and America (they had to return to Germany), a priest to counsel killers in Poland, a resisting factory worker to Auschwitz, and a POW to Siberia.

The project inspired an unusual level of academic commitment. Students often went well beyond the required material in developing their avatars. Their research included Internet searches for images, period-appropriate children's names, and food specialties as well as reading scholarly works on particular topics of interest. They wrote an average of 1,120 words per post, equivalent to four and a half pages a week, in addition to their regular work. Most important, the students integrated all of the information into a coherent whole and uncovered their own historical lessons along the way.

Students said they gained a greater appreciation for everyday complexities—how ordinary people adjusted to extraordinary times, and how adaptations propelled new social and political realities. Their simple vignettes expressed complicated ideas. One farm woman from Dachau supported but had visceral misgivings about the local concentration camp: "I dislike the communists as much as anyone else, but smelling [their ashes] on the wind turned my stomach." Students felt that they came to understand how history makes individuals and individuals make history. A sophomore reflected: "The project forced us to see the situation as much from within as a student can, years later and thousands of miles away. Oskar, to whom I grew attached, had a past, a family, thoughts, ideas. There were justifications for his actions that were intricately tied in with all of these, ones that I would never have considered without a specific persona in mind."

The project also underscored how bound the characters' perceptions and opinions were to the circumstances of the moment—and how decisions made in one decade reverberate in the next. One character, an armaments-manufacturer-turned-democratic-leader, observed that "the only way to begin to make sense of the five very different Germanys I have lived in is to understand the malleable nature of the human mind and human society."

Creating lives can be an effective way to develop individual interests within the bounds of a survey course, as a complement to traditional lectures, exams, and papers. Students commented that it provided a sense of freedom rare in their course work, allowing space for imagination, authorship, and identification. The personal narratives were more work than traditional weekly papers, yet students agreed it was a rewarding way to expand upon the standard approach. As one said, "It was more than worth it. It allowed us to fuse the course material with our own creativity and take away so much more than a typical survey of history."

Although the experience involved a small group of motivated Stanford students, mostly history majors, the basic method can be adapted to different fields and classroom environments. The core concept—creating continuing lives within a Web-based community forum—could have broad appeal. In turn, the personal investment fosters enthusiasm and lasting learning.

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