

Breaking Musical Boundaries: A Journey with Explore More



Design by Daniëlle Klomp

Text by Pieter Desmet

“Oops!...I Did It Again.” With these words, Britney Spears catapulted herself into worldwide stardom about 20 years ago. Her success sharply contrasted with the challenging situation the music industry faced at that time. It was plagued by the rise of peer-to-peer platforms, making it effortless to share music files without paying, resulting in an explosive surge in illegal downloads. Industry revenues and artists’ incomes plummeted. Experts made gloomy predictions, suggesting that the era in which people were willing to pay for music was forever gone. However, these predictions proved to be wrong. In October 2008, Spotify was launched, marking a turning point in our music experience. Spotify and similar streaming services offer users a legal and accessible alternative to illegally downloading and sharing music files, profoundly changing how people worldwide listen to music.

Trapped in Your Bubble

Streaming services provide unlimited access to millions of songs. You can listen to your favorite artists, but there is also an abundance of new music to discover. While this is enjoyable, it also presents a challenge: where to begin in the overwhelming array of options? Spotify lends a helping hand with Discover Weekly, a weekly playlist introducing you to new music. Far from arbitrary, the algorithm learns from your listening behavior, intelligently selecting new music that aligns with your habits. These learning recommendation systems have become a core strategy for online platforms like Spotify and Netflix. While seemingly sympathetic, they face growing criticism. Paradoxically this is due to limited diversity: analyzing existing preferences results in a restricted selection of genres or artists. You remain trapped in your bubble of listening habits; you are, in a sense, confined in an echo chamber. This paradox inspired designer Daniëlle Klomp. She took on the challenge to design a feature that genuinely helps broaden our musical horizons.

Image 1 – Your musical bubble



You Are What You Listen To

Delving into literature on the relationship between music and well-being, Daniëlle discovered that music is more than a source of passive entertainment – it serves a role in our self-development. Music helps us reflect on who we are and who we want to become. Listening to favorite songs and exploring new genres assists in shaping our identity and self-image. This is particularly relevant for teenagers and adolescents because they are actively developing their identity (Laiho, 2004). Music becomes a means for them to explore and communicate their self-image. In this way, music is a powerful tool for self-construction (Waterman, 2011). By exposing ourselves to various music genres, music broadens our range of possible identities, contributing to our emotional well-being.

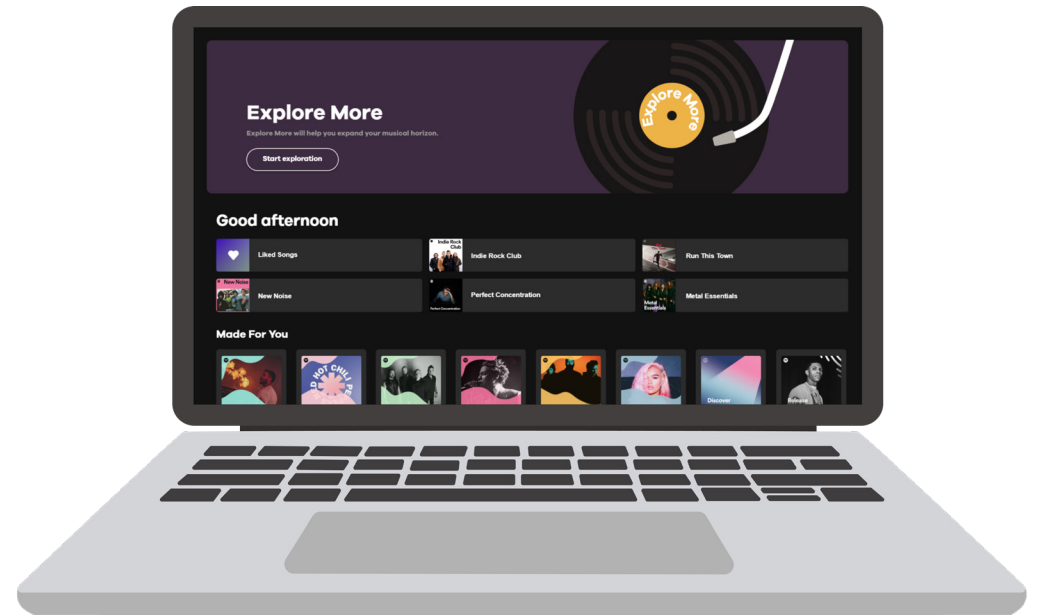


Image 2 – Explore More

Music as a Journey of Discovery

Using her insights into the relationship between music and well-being, Daniëlle developed a new Spotify feature: “Explore More.” This feature takes you on a journey of discovery through the vast musical landscape. The core idea is that you are encouraged in a fun way to explore new music genres, thereby broadening your musical horizon and gaining a deeper understanding of your own musical preferences. How does it work? Explore More provides a visual overview of the musical landscape – a map of music (see figure 3). On this map, you see your own music preferences, literally as bubbles in the landscape (see figure 3-1). Follow your curiosity to explore further. Begin by choosing a genre, such as “Blues” (see figure 3-2). The map zooms in on that genre, revealing sub-genres. It shows which sub-genres you already like (Chicago Blues) and suggests new sub-genres that align with your taste (Jump Blues and Soul Blues). Choose a recommended sub-genre or let Explore More surprise you. A short playlist introduces you to that sub-genre (see figure 3-3). If you enjoy it, add it to your taste profile, allowing Spotify to use it for future recommendations.

Breaking the Bubble

An exciting additional feature of Explore More is that it prompts reflection during your musical excursions. While listening to new music, you will be posed various questions: What emotions are you experiencing? Does the music resonate with you? What elements of the music appeal to you? These questions help you reflect on your musical explorations. You can explore as many genres as you like. With each sub-genre you add to your taste profile, you see how your evolving music taste expands your music map. After various explorations, Explore More provides a summary: an opportunity to revisit your musical discoveries. The summary displays the genres you’ve discovered and offers insight into your musical development.

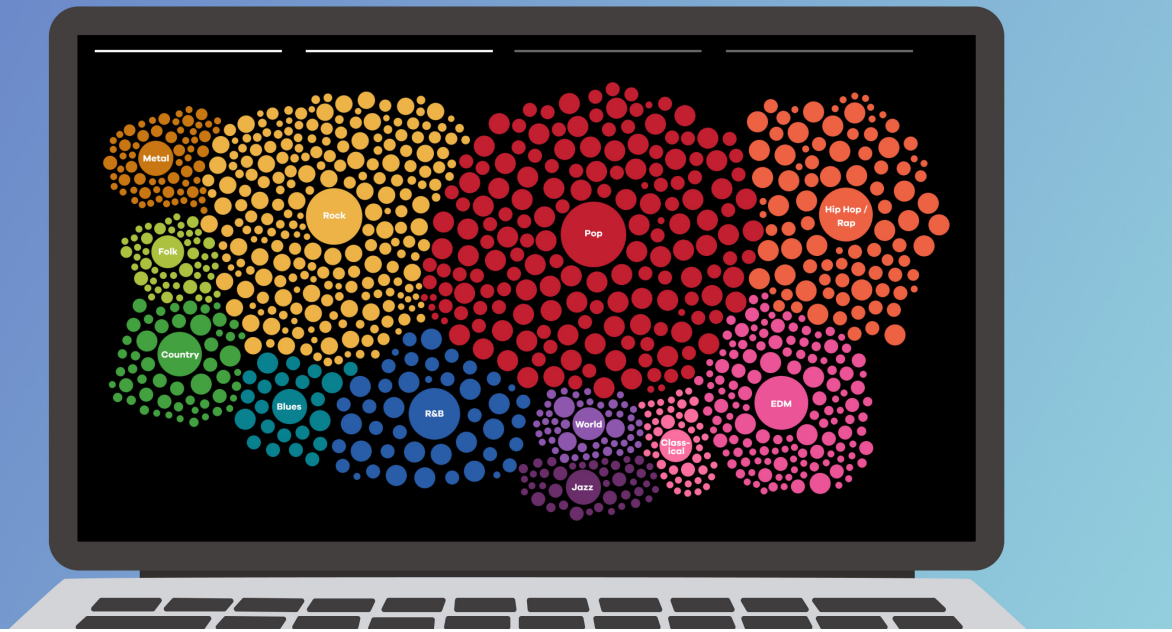


Image 3 – A map of the musical landscape

Love for the Blues

Daniëlle observed the increasing influence of artificial intelligence in our daily lives. While it can offer numerous benefits in streaming services, it sometimes comes at the expense of our well-being. Think of filter bubbles narrowing our musical experience, a bias towards commercial success, and a tendency toward passive consumption. Although receiving more of the same can be very comfortable, it hinders the path to richer and deeper musical experiences. As a designer, Daniëlle found it essential to explore how AI can contribute to meaningful experiences. The project also broke

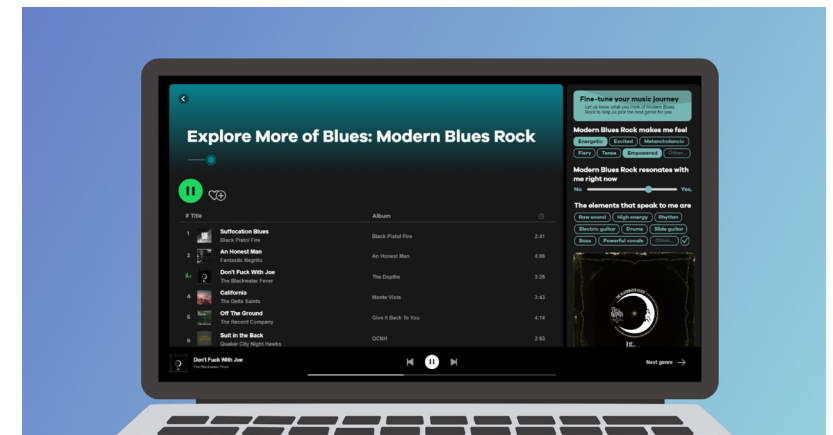
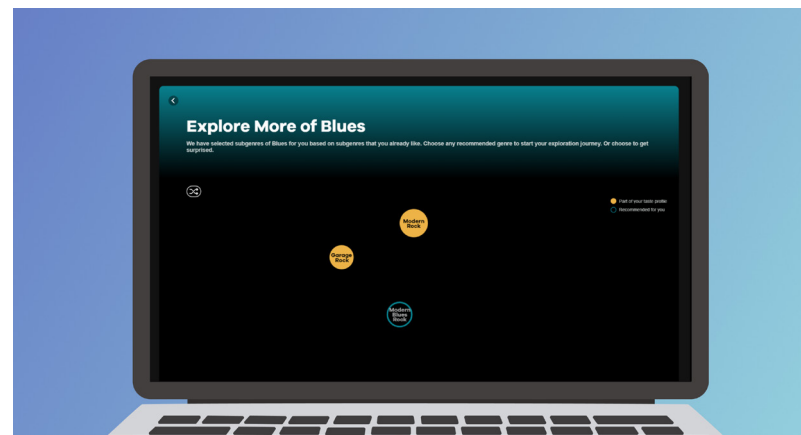
her own music bubble, leading her to discover a range of new Blues genres. Creating new playlists brought her a lot of joy. In her own words, she says, “This project inspired me to continuously explore new musical horizons.” Through her design, Daniëlle demonstrated how AI can guide us on a wonderful journey through the world of music. So, sorry Britney; “Oops!...I did it again” is now, thanks to Explore More, transformed into “Oops!...I tried something new”! Discovery and renewal are the true essence of music: a journey that never stops but always remains refreshing.

Image 4 – Discover new genres with Explore More

1 Select a genre

2 Choose a sub-genre

3 Listen to the new sub-genre



Daniëlle Klomp (photo) developed Explore More in 2023 as part of a graduation project for the master's program Design for Interaction. Supervisors were Haiyan Xue and Willem van der Maden (TU Delft).

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Colophon

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Reference

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