Dear Tom Jackson and Archie Tse,

As an assignment for my Information Visualization class at the University of Maryland, I have reviewed the interactive graphic, “Is It Better to Buy or Rent?” (link). I remember seeing the graphic when it was first published by The New York Times, as I had pondered the “buy or rent” decision before entering graduate school. I was impressed by your attempt to analyze the situation without oversimplifying the contributing factors.

Overall, this is a fantastic way of analyzing the problem. It is targeted perfectly: people attempting to make the “buy or rent” decision should recognize the key values that affect the outcome, and most should not be afraid to play with a screen full of numbers to analyze the situation. I quickly and easily learned something that surprised me: doubling (or even tripling) my down payment will not have a significant effect on the result, given the default assumptions for other values. I presume this is due to the opportunity cost of not investing that extra money nearly matching the savings from reduced mortgage interest.

I have two major critiques of the visualization. First, there should be more transparency into how the calculations are performed. It would be very useful to know exactly which of the input values affect which of the output values (the chart values, and those listed to the right). Many of the relationships are listed on the Methodology panel, but a full disclosure of the equations would be helpful. Since you already have several panes that are initially hidden from the default view, you should be able to add another easily, without crowding screen real estate.

Second, it should be easier to select reasonable values for assumptions such as “Annual rent increase/decrease.” It’s unclear where the default values are derived from, and unlike a value for, say, “Mortgage rate,” there is no obvious place for users to find historic or current values. The links beside the “Monthly rent” and “Home price” fields do provide region-specific advice, which is excellent. But given the effect of changing either slider on the left by a single percent, they need something similar. Also, allowing users to enter 30% for a sustained growth of home prices or rent increases seems excessive. Shrinking the range would potentially encourage more realistic models.

Otherwise, my issues were fairly minor. I think the links next to “Monthly rent” and “Home price” should be highlighted – the question mark icon typically indicates documentation links, not functional aids. Also, users should be able to set the sliders on the left to non-integer values (allowing decimal values would be consistent with the settings for “Mortgage rate” and “Rate of return on investments”).

Despite my critiques, thank you for putting together a very functional, informative tool for analyzing a complex situation. I hope to see more like it in the future.

Sincerely,

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