To the Visualization team of New York Times,

I am a computer science graduate student in the University of Maryland, College Park USA. I am doing Information Visualization course under Prof. Ben Shneiderman. During this course I came across many fantastic visualizations created by you and have been asked to present my views on any one of them. I took Olympics 2008 visualization published on 4th Aug 2008 in the sport section of New York Times. This visualization shows the details of Olympic Games from the year 1896 to 2008.

The Olympics 2008 visualization is fantastic in-terms of amount and the quality of information. It’s very easy to understand the way it’s presented. The map generation is very fast when user queries, which always keeps him/her interested in the visualization. It has nice informative feedback while loading the data. Tool tip over each circle gives a quick overview of the performance of the country. User can perform dynamic queries by using slider, clicking country circles and clicking hyperlinks; and view can be changed by selecting tab which helps user to view the data differently.

However, there are few points which are missing and can be implemented to make this visualization better. According to the mantra, “Overview first, zoom and filter, details on demand”, given by Prof. Shneiderman, this visualization should support more filtering and zooming capabilities to enable user to make more sense on the given data. Filtering should be provided on types of games, medal types, form of the game (whether it is man, woman or mixed), and participants names. So that user can generate more ranks after applying filters, for an example rank based on medal types, game types etc. In addition, Data can be grouped by continent to give more abstract picture.

When user clicks any circle, results are being displayed on the lower half of the visualization, which can be hidden if user doesn’t scroll. Instead of showing results like this, we can follow Travel Visualization. Where after clicking, record zooms and provides detailed information. Furthermore, after zooming, each circle can be shown like Spending Visualization to show information in a very interactive and organized fashion. There is also latency between appearance of upper half and lower half of the map. It can be avoided as it is not a real time data and can be cached.

In geographic view, circles are placed according to the location of the country on the world map. For the user who is not good at geography, it is very difficult to search his/her country if that circle is too small and doesn’t have a label. So, placing the world map picture in the back ground and making circles transparent like Swine Flu visualization can really help the user. Sliding is not smooth and doesn’t indicate whether user has selected the slider. Swine Flu visualization slider can be used to improve the sliding experience. Coloring scheme is not easily identifiable and there is no legend information for medal types. Moreover, if user selects BY RANKING tab and query year 2008 results, the last circle of the visualization is almost hidden which puts a question on the scalability of this visualization as many new countries can be included in the future.
Showing aggregated results for the specific time period can provide further insights into the data. New visualizations can be added to see the growth of Olympics as many games have been added or removed over the period of time. We can also add the graphs to show the performance of country during the specified time period.

Finally, I can say that gathered data are very informative and have been presented in a great way. I wish all the best to Visualization team of New York Times and hope to see their continuous great contribution towards visualization field.

Sincerely,

Puneet Sharma

Graduate Student, Computer Science Department

University of Maryland, College Park, USA

Email: puneet@cs.umd.edu

Date: 09/09/2009