Dear New York Times Interactive Designers:

I am writing to you to send you my comments and suggestions on your recent visualization work of the Netflix Rental data for the year 2009 – http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/01/10/nyregion/20100110-netflix-map.html

It is quite a wonderfully insightful visualization of the Netflix data. The visualization follows the Visual Information Seeking mantra given by Prof. Shneiderman: Overview First, Zoom and Filter, then Details-on-Demand. It gives an overview of the whole city first for a particular movie, with the spectrum of colors representing how well the movie fared in the rental list for each zip code. On moving the mouse over each neighborhood, we get the details – a list of the top ten most rented movies in the area along with the rank of the movie in question.

With this approach, it is fairly easy to see which movies dominated the popularity charts in 2009 in the 12 cities. The rank color schemes and fonts used are fairly lucid and make the visualization appealing and comprehensible. Also, I liked the fact that on selecting a particular neighborhood, only the top 10 movies in that area are shown. A longer list would be too cluttered up to provide any useful information. The visualization is rendered without any issues in different browsers too.

However, I would like to make some recommendations as well, with the notion that they will help you to improve your future work.

**Range and Scale:**

- **Range definition** - The visualization would be more discerning if the range of comparison was defined. For example, when you say Most Rented, or Least Rented, how many rentals does it correspond to?
- **Scale Calibration** - The scale at the top of the visualization for Rentals, Alphabetical Order and MetaScore should be calibrated. This would provide a shortcut to a user to quickly jump to the movie he/she is looking for instead of scrolling along the scale looking at all the movie titles. For example, if the movies are viewed according to the alphabetical order and the user wants to locate ‘The Proposal’, the user has to move the pointer along the scale till he/she finds movies titles starting with the letter ‘P’. This has two issues:

  - The user might scroll till the movie titles beginning with letter ‘T’ and search there. Since, it is categorized under ‘P’; the user might not be able to find the movie.
The user has to spend time shifting the pointer along the scale to look at each movie.

According to Prof. Shneiderman’s ‘Eight Golden Rules of Interface Design’, the users desire to increase the pace of interaction and shortcuts are helpful to expert users. Thus, a more desirable shortcut would be to categorize the titles alphabetically and provide quick links to categories. A Search option can also be used to locate a movie.

**Methodology:**

- The methodology used here is to plot raw numbers for the rentals for the whole year. However, this methodology has a serious flaw – it doesn’t take into consideration the release date of the movie. A movie released earlier in 2009 would be rented more than a movie released towards the end of the year. A more realistic approach would be to introduce a third dimension – time. Movie rentals statistics should be plotted against timelines to aid expert users in deriving conclusions about box office status and its correlation with political or financial scenarios, variations in user preferences as the year progressed etc., from this analysis.

- Also, a minor recommendation here. Instead of classifying the data according to cities and neighborhoods first, and then displaying the overall popularity of the movie in that area, the data could be organized the other way round. For each movie, you could first mark all the cities where it was most popular and where it was least popular and so on. This could easily help analysts deduce demographic patterns.

Again, thanks for a great work! I hope that I can see more of your excellent work in the future.

Sincerely,

Preeti Bhargava