Attention CHARLES WILSON,  
MARVIN ORELLANA and MIKI MEEK  

THE NEW YORK TIMES  

Dear designers,  

I have been using the visualization tool called *The Learning Machines*¹, published on the New York Times website on September 15, 2010. This tool presents the evolution of machines and gadgets that have been used in classrooms to stimulate children in the learning process, and is supposed to be a complement to the *Video Games In the Classroom*² article, published on the same day.  

I would like to congratulate you on this very original idea. By presenting these gadgets on a timeline that spans from 1600 until today, you allow us users to interact with the information, and learn about these curious inventions that just don’t seem to fit the world we are living in these days. The tool is really easy to use and presents information in a ludic and entertaining manner, making the information even more interesting for the common user. However, there seems to be some problems with the tool’s interface. I visited the tool on different browsers like Chrome, Firefox and Safari, and I always had the same issue: The *Zoom In* and *Zoom Out* buttons block the year 2000 on the timeline, while the *Previous* and *Next* buttons tend to change their size while we select different instruments. While these details don’t make the interface less usable, they do distract from the tool’s main goal.  

I would like to compliment you on the fact that you show all the information on the timeline when the visualization tool is opened, separating the tools by century, and then allow users to zoom into the timeline. However, the zoom buttons allowed me to zoom into the timeline to the *minutes* level of detail. For example, according to the visualization tool, the *Horn-Book was introduced exactly at 5:17 pm, on September 11 1650*. I think that this level of detail is not only inaccurate, but also completely unnecessary. Zooming out to the original scale takes several clicks. Maybe it would have been better to restrict the zooming tools to zoom up to a level of detail of years, or  

¹Tool may be found here: http://goo.gl/bnZ8  
²Article may be found here: http://goo.gl/BWU6
maybe decades, instead of minutes.

I would also like to compliment the way you present each instrument, tidily arranged on the timeline. I really liked the colors and shaped that were picked. However, there is an inconsistency on the interface that makes the Ferule -presented as an horizontal line at the bottom of the timeline- easy to miss, for all the other instruments present a vertical line on the middle of the timeline. It would have been better to either present all the tools' with the same format, to avoid confusing the users. The vertical lines are also too thin, making them hard to select with the mouse pointer. This problem would be more apparent for people that have visual or motor deficits, like the elderly, making it prone to errors and frustration.

Overall, I found the visualization tool very interesting, but I felt that I wanted to know more about the instruments you presented, only to be left with a thirst for knowledge. Maybe their description could be expanded, or you could include a link to the source of your information, so we could read more about it.

I would like to thank you for your work, and encourage you to keep on creating this kind of tools, keeping in mind the user’s experience. I hope these comments will help you improve your visualization tool, so it can be more useful and user-friendly. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any comments.

Yours sincerely,

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