Dear NYTimes Editors,

I was indeed very happy to find the visualization of popularity of Soccer World Cup players on Facebook since I recently started to follow the game. I have always wanted to know how similar my opinions are, with that of others. The visualization is very user friendly with a nice slider on top for different dates and different options to sort the players. It is also eye catching as each player is represented by a snapshot of them in action. The informative feedback like displaying temporal popularity on hovering over a player and a simple display with right amount of transitions makes it conform fairly well to the 8 golden design rules proposed by Dr. Ben Schneiderman.

For a new user, the visualization is successful in depicting the underlying data. The relative popularity can easily be recognized by the proportionally scaled images of the players. Any curious user would first take a look at the first or last day, most important days for a tournament. The last day shows the highest popularity for Andres Iniesta, whose goal led to Spain’s victory. But when the user slides over to the first day, where almost 80% of the players share a similar popularity, the display gets cluttered making it difficult to identify them quickly. A zoom option leading to horizontal scrolling would have helped in improving the display for such situations.

As the users start exploring more with the interactive visualization, they might want to take a look at relative popularity of just the top 5 players each day (or any other number keeping the maximum to 30 as it currently is). A vertical control pane on the side could have had a dropdown box to select this range of ranks and even a checkbox group to select the countries of interest of the user.

The overall visualization is based on displaying the popularities for any one day, but a soccer fan might want to take a look at the popularity of a favorite player or any other player on all days of the tournament. When I wanted to take a look at one of my favorite players, David Villa, I arranged them by last names and found it cumbersome to click on next through all the days. When a user clicks on a player, a line graph can appear above or below the date slider showing his popularity on all days. And clicking on multiple players could display all the corresponding line graphs which will help me in arguing for my player’s popularity with that of my friend’s.

According to the mantra, “Overview first, zoom and filter, details on demand”, the visualization is successful in satisfying the overview and details on demand criteria, but falls a little short of zoom and filtering options as with the two situations mentioned earlier. I am hoping that these suggestions will allow the creators to present their limited data without making room for errors (for example asking for search terms) and at the same time allow the users to see only the data that they want.

There could have been a few minor improvements in details on demand for a very keen user. In the hourly plot of the popularity for that day, it is expected for peaks to be present somewhere during the match time. It would have been nice if the corresponding team’s match time was shaded on timeline. For example the peak for Iniesta on the last day is actually at the end of match due to the extra time goal that won them the...
world cup. This shading would also indicate a player’s popularity even before the match started thereby capturing temporal popularity very well.

Lastly, the use of Facebook data for displaying the popularity might actually have indicated better results than that of Twitter or Google trends. A very similar visualization by CNN, World Cup Twitter Buzz, uses Twitter data, whose popularity results doesn’t match the Facebook data. The player’s tab on last day indicates Wesley Sneijder, Georgie Welcome and Fabio Cannavaro as the top three players mentioned in tweets, which surprisingly doesn’t include any Spanish player.

Overall I enjoyed using the visualization and hope to see more of these in the future.

Thank you,
Varun K. Nagaraja