Dear authors,

This is a short critique of your interactive visualization “A Peek into Netflix Queues” (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/01/10/nyregion/20100110-netflix-map.html) published on January 8th, 2011 on the NY Times website.

The Google Maps based visualization sheds light on the popularity of certain movies in certain zip codes, which in turn gives an insight of how movie genres, movie ratings, and demographics correlate. Two interesting patterns I found are that the two “Tyler Perry” movies were most rented in areas with predominantly African-American population, and the movie “Bedtime Stories”, a family fantasy, was only rented in the suburbs of the featured cities, but not in the metropolitan areas. While the visualization seemed to have raised some privacy concerns, the data used is based on anonymous usage patterns and does not give access to any personal user data.

There were, however, a couple of issues that I wanted to point the designers to, in an effort to improve this very useful visualization even more.

• Large issue:
  While the ordering buttons on the top right help, the ability to locate a specific movie is confusing, and is lacking for expert users. Since the movies are not listed, one cannot also know whether a certain movie is in the list or not. A possible solution is to keep the next and previous buttons, but change the slider into a combo box, or better yet, a ”deck” of all the movie posters side-by-side, which will grab the user attention faster. Expert users will probably also appreciate a search feature to avoid having to, for instance, sort the movies alphabetically and go through them from left to right to find a specific movie.

• Medium issue:
  A concern I had was the sometimes very small size of areas of specific zip codes, which coupled with the lack of zooming, even though the interface is based on Google Maps, can impede the interactivity. The insight from the colorful map is appealing, but zooming might allow spotting those outlier areas in the middle of an otherwise homogeneous neighborhood.
• Small issue:
   On a final note, I discovered by accident that the map supports panning. Perhaps changing the mouse cursor to the standard hand icon on clicking and holding would make that feature less subtle.

On the positive side, the choice of color is suitable even for color-blind users, and the interface is fluid and very responsive. The overview panel with the city maps on the right updates seamlessly with every selection, and draws the attention to the rental pattern differences between the cities. Thank you for the great effort and the insight.

Sincerely,
Sameh Khamis
Department of Computer Science
University of Maryland - College Park