Dear New York Times Designers,

I am writing this letter in response to your "2010 World Cup Rankings" interactive visualization available on New York Times at http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/sports/soccer/2010-world-cup-team-rankings.html. Firstly, I would like to express my congratulation on your nicely designed visualization which is extremely easy and intuitive to use. The interactive graphic effectively shows the live performances of 32 national teams in sorted order according to a number of statistical categories during the tournament. The highlighting when a cell is moved over or clicked on for me is no doubt the most useful feature. With so much "boring" numerical data, I think you have succeeded in creating an interesting interactive table which I believe attracts even non-soccer fans to look at and explore.

There are, however some limitations which I think can be improved by following the "Eight Golden Rules of Interface Design" proposed by Ben Shneiderman. The first limitation is the inconsistent representation of the data. In the visualization, the two teams Spain and Netherland are always highlighted in gray indicating the last ones being eliminated. I think this highlighting is unnecessary and would suggest removing (i.e., striving for consistency) since it does not convey any extra information (the two teams playing in the final are simply ranked first and second in the first column), yet makes the users quite confused especially when too many cells are highlighted at the same time.

Secondly, there are only two interactive actions allowed: moving the mouse over and clicking on a cell. These simple actions might make experienced users feel obligated to follow the tool which in turn would make them quickly feel bored once no other actions left to be performed. This also makes it difficult for users if they want to compare the performances of more than 2 teams. Thus, I would suggest one simple extension allowing users to select more than 1 team at a time with different highlighting colors. This helps reduce short-term memory load when interested teams (in case of more than 2 teams) are kept highlighted simultaneously on the screen instead of flickering around. A filter function which allows users to temporarily hide and show a certain subset of teams such as those in the same group, from the same continents etc might be very helpful as well. In addition, details about some abbreviations (e.g., W, D, L), terminologies (e.g., FIFA world ranking in which month?) can be shown in pop-up dialogs when moved over to make the visualization more friendly towards non-soccer fans who are not so familiar with the concepts. I believe these improvements will give the users more freedom to explore the visualization which in fact supports internal locus of control as suggested by one of the "eight rules".

Finally, one more useful feature I'd love to see in this visualization is the time bar which is similar to the one in http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/05/01/us/20100501-oil-spill-tracker.html. Since the 2010 World Cup has ended, it is useful for the users to be able to go through the period and visualize the statistics chronologically by scrolling across the bar. The eliminated teams over time can also be effectively shown using this method.

Despite my critiques, I really appreciate your effort in designing such a great tool and hope my suggestions would make your interactive visualizations more effective in the future.
Sincerely,

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