Dear New York Times designers,

The aim of this letter is to let you know a constructive critique about one of your visualizations: http://london2012.nytimes.com/results

I like very much the fully reader-driven approach [1], as well as the interaction features you provide: filters, linked views, details on demand and a time slider for selecting the particular Olympic game.

Also while initially I thought that the bubbles are a bad choice based on our cognitive limitation to compare areas, finally I found in them a certain visual appeal that seems to be a requirement for any massive-audience-few-minutes-use visualization. Furthermore I realize that the accurate comparison could be accomplished with the "Medal Count" view.

Another design decision that finally please me is the geographical arrangement of the bubbles. It is easy to seek the countries of your interest because usually you know where they are located in the map, but since the cartogram distorts the real positions a textual search box would be a good addition.

I believe that a visualization (specially in exploratory tools) is more about questions than about answers, that's why I've found your visualization very useful. Your tool gave me pointers to learn about history, for example the "Unified Team" in Barcelona 92 let you know about the disintegration of the USSR or the absence of USA Team in Moscow 80 speaks about the cold war tensions. Maybe this kind of insights could be more clear with a "Gapminder" visualization, or maybe including some textual annotation that highlights the historic facts would be useful for this propose as well.

Nevertheless, because this visualization is not guided at all I believe that it needs a redesign in order to clarify what are the main comparisons from where the user is suppose to get the insights. Firstly, when a dataset has a time dimension usually is a good candidate to drive the comparisons, "Is Spain improving or not?", "When Canada got their bests results?" Those questions are better solved if the time dimension is mapped into a space dimension, like in a typical stock market line graph. With your current design the user has to select time by time and go back and forth so those comparisons rely on the short-term memory, which is not a good idea. Furthermore, this dataset has a meaningful hierarchy that can not be properly explored. The hierarchy would be: continent (I guess it is important because you've mapped it with color), country, sport, particular contest; and the dimension to compare will be the total number of medals. This schema fits with visualizations like Treemap, which is compact and I hope your audience will find it understandable because it is widely used. Also the "Medal Count" view could be visualized as a stacked bar chart in order to do the comparison of the count pre-attentive.

There are some usability minor issues, like the not reversal action of "Show all" in the Medal Count view, or like the absence of a 'waiting feedback' in the Medals panel, when the user clicks in a bubble it takes more than a second to update this view. But in general the visualization is not cluttered and is straight forward to understand.

Thank you, I am looking forward use more of your tools.

Sincerely,
Juan Morales