Dear Mr. Ericson:

I am a PhD student in Dr. Ben Shneiderman’s Information Visualization class at the University of Maryland. I am writing in regards to the visualization of medal counts for the 2012 Olympic Games (which can be found at http://london2012.nytimes.com/results).

I found the use of size to indicate the number of medals won by a given country to be both intuitive and helpful. This representation allows the user to instantly identify the “big players” on the Olympic stage.

Additionally, presenting the countries loosely in their geographic position is both aesthetically pleasing as well as being a very convenient way of locating a particular country of interest. While true geographic location may make the search for a specific country more efficient, the use of color alleviates any real difficulty in finding a specific country as it provides a reference frame without needlessly constraining the visualization to an actual map of the world.

I do, however, have some suggestions which may improve the usability of the visualization as well as its ability to convey information.

First, it seems that a given country’s performance at the games is affected at least in part by whether or not it is the host country. However, this information is displayed in the upper-left corner, where it does not lend itself to pre-attentive recognition. Instead, one must first look at the host city for a given year’s Games, recall the corresponding country, then search the map for said country before any correlation can be derived. Highlighting the host country, by a simple ring around that country’s circle perhaps, would be helpful and would not impact the continent-based coloring scheme already in place.

Second, the detailed medal information at the bottom, while interesting, is not realizing its full potential. Filtering is restricted to a single country at any given time, whereas the ability to instead view a subset of countries may be helpful if one is interested in comparing rival countries over time. It would also be helpful to create a view which filters by sport or by medal type rather than a solely country-centric viewpoint.
This actually leads to the more generalized suggestion of two-way coordination between information panes. Currently, selecting a country in the upper pane will refresh the lower pane with country-specific information, but this is a one-way interaction. Filtering the map above by selecting information in the pane below (e.g. comparing countries in a particular sport) seems like a simple, intuitive way to further analyze the data.

I think the visualization could also benefit from the incorporation of additional data sets for a richer user experience.

The addition of historic context, for example, could help deepen the understanding of the user. The lack of competing countries in the 1980 Olympic Games may seem like an error without the knowledge of the 65-country boycott of that year.

Also, further insights could be gained by correlating a country’s general statistics to its Olympic performance. A comparison of a country’s medal count and its GDP, for instance, may yield some interesting conclusions.

Finally, it could be beneficial to display the map based on some user-selected focus. As an example, medal count alone is not necessarily the ultimate metric of performance. There may be greater interest in the ratio between medals earned and number of athletes sent.

Please do not mistake this as a harsh critique, despite my many suggestions. If you have any questions or would like to discuss my suggestions further, please feel free to email me at the address above.

Sincerely,
Philip Dasler