Dear Shan Carter,

I am a Human-Computer Interaction Master's student at the University of Maryland, taking a course on Information Visualization with Professor Ben Shneiderman. We have been assigned to critique a New York Times visualization, and I chose the one on “Steve Jobs’s Patents” (http://goo.gl/t2Sw5).

First and foremost, I want to applaud the exquisite work that you and your colleagues produce. The aforementioned visualization does an remarkable job at presenting the high quality content to the novice or average user, since it is very simple, straight-forward, and understandable. It clearly follows the Information Visualization mantra “Overview first, Zoom and filter and details on demand” (with a bit less focus on the filtering). It is very consistent, it provides informative feedback, and it makes every step of the exploration process clear and understandable.

As far as the choice of services for the target users are concerned, this interactive visualization gives the novice users all the tools they need to study it and learn from the data. However, I find it somewhat weak in aiding the expert user in acquiring insight on the data. More specifically, it would be useful to be able to sort or group the different - currently unsorted (Image 1)- categories by name or by relevance; perhaps through a treemap (i.e. group them by relation to small portable devices, desktop computers, laptop computers etc.). It would also be helpful to know the number of patents in each general or specific category (the treemap would eliminate this problem), as well as the number of citations for each patent. This would be particularly useful since some questions that one might ask would be “which patents were most controversial?” or “which areas did Steve Jobs mostly contribute in?”. Lastly, filtering through the data would make exploration less cumbersome, since the number of patents presented is forbidding.

The management of different spaces on this visualization is very intuitive, i.e the left and right panning and the fact that the details appear right under the selected icon. However, I would like to be able to hide the details by pressing the escape key, or by re-clicking the selected icon. Also I would like to know how the patents are sorted from left to right and perhaps be able to change the sorting parameter; perhaps a timeline sort, or number of citations would offer more insight into the data. Furthermore, the collapsible details that you have provided are a great widget to implement “details on demand”. Another means to provide additional feedback could be mousing over the icons (it could provide a rank based on citations, i.e. iphone ranks 3rd in citations). Another widget to consider would be previous/next buttons while viewing details, since users are likely to want to examine similar patents.

A significant point of confusion are the image captions. The fact that many of the labels are the same (Image 2) doesn’t clarify how the products differ. Moreover, color coding and clearer images could be used to distinguish between the different patents. Additionally, an
overlay of the zoomed image (when clicked on) would rectify the illegibility of the text on some images (Image 3). Lastly, the location and size of the arrows above the images renders them unnoticeable; perhaps putting them on the right would help (Image 4)

Again, thank you for making these wonderful and inspirational visualizations.

Pano

P.S. I really appreciate the fact that you’re giving the audience the opportunity to send feedback (I’m referring to the button at the bottom of the page)