Dear Mr. Bostock, Mr. Carter and Mr. Keller,

I am a PhD student in Dr. Ben Shneiderman’s information visualization class at University of Maryland. I am writing in regards to the visualization of Oscar contenders titled “Among the Oscar Contenders, a Host of Connections”¹. I found the amazingly designed interactive graphics very intuitive and helpful to instantly identify the clusters of highly acclaimed people among the Oscar contenders of this year. It was also very interesting to be able to quickly identify outliers such as Denzel Washington and Naomi Watts that were not in any clusters, which may contribute to identifying their individual capabilities. Going beyond the usual numeric statistics and visualizing these relations and clusters was very elegant. As you may be considering another visualization for next year’s Oscar nominees, I would like to share some of my experiences exploring the graphics which may be interesting to you.

Exploring the visualization, I noticed that some of the titles of this year’s nominated movies like “Life of Pi” were shown with a black font, and some others like “The Sessions” were shown with a gray font. I couldn’t find a reason for such difference and thought this may not comply with some of the guidelines including the “strive for consistency” rule of “Shneiderman's eight golden rules of interface design”².

Another point was that although I was seeing the visualization in a 24” screen, the long graphics did not fit in one horizontal computer screen, so for the bottom parts of the graphics I had to go back and forth to the legend to remember which color corresponds to which role in the movie. I thought this may also not fully comply with the “reduce short-term memory load” rule of the eight golden rules. It may help if the legend would float, or being placed strategic to different scrolling situations. Another point related to the legend is that it took me a while figuring out that the gray outlined circles are this year’s nominated movies. I did not find any information about it in the legend.

There were also some comparative information that I think may make the visualization more interesting. For example, as movies with any previous nomination are listed in the graph, there is not much information about the category in which the previous nomination was, and also how many nomination did each previous movie receive. It would be nice to know if the person was part of a movie with a huge success and many nominations or the one with just a few. More importantly, while the information about the previous “wins” of the people are present in the graph with gray dots, one has to hover over and search through similar white nodes to find out the previous “nominations” of each person. For example, Denzel Washington was nominated for best supporting actor for performing in “Cry Freedom (1987)” but there is no way of knowing that unless one hovers over all the nodes connected to him and reads their captions.

It also seemed to me that the movies connected to people didn't follow a specific ordering. It would have been nice if they were chronically ordered and maybe differently shaded to differentiate between more recently acclaimed people and the ones who received most of their recognitions in more distant past. The movies connected to a person could also be grouped together based on the “wins” or the “nominations” that the person received preforming in them. However, I understand that this visualization may have solely aimed to demonstrate the relationship and clusters between contenders but not other aspects of the network.

Other information that I was looking for and was not able to find without referring to sources outside this visualization, was all the contenders in the same category this year. It would be nice if one could interactively highlight contenders in the same category or at least there were a list accompanying the graphics showing that information.

I would be more than happy to provide more information and discuss my experience with the visualizations in more details. I would also be highly grateful if you had the time to briefly write to me about some of the design choices you made that correspond to the points I mentioned in this letter. It would be a privilege for me gaining practical insights from expert visualization designers such as yourselves.

Sincerely,

Shobeir Fakhraei
Department of Computer Science
University of Maryland,
College Park, MD 20740
shobeir@cs.umd.edu