To the NY Times Visualization Team:

I am a Masters student at The University of Maryland currently enrolled in Professor Shneiderman’s Information Visualization class. I am writing concerning your visualization of the total number of medals won over the years by individual countries, http://london2012.nytimes.com/results.

I found this visualization instantly understandable and identifiable. This bubble chart walked me through a path of questions that drew me deeper and deeper into the piece. I began by asking the question, “What was the United States performance in the 2012 London Olympics?” The summation of the medals by themselves meant nothing to me as a reader, “Was the performance good. Was it bad?” That’s when I stepped further into the landscape, I grabbed the slider at the top and examined 2008’s performance. I could see that we had actually reduced our total medal count from 2008 to 2012. Then I inquired more, “If we performed worse, then who performed better?” Moving the slider back and forth allowed me to instantly spot the countries who performed better and the countries that performed worse. The visualization morphed from a quick graphic to an enjoyable adventure of inquisition.

Providing the countries in their geo-located positions allowed for me to instantly locate countries of interest. The simplicity and consistency of the design allowed for a split second understanding of its use and the font choice allowed for even the smallest of text to be read. Choosing to omit the text for circles that could not accommodate it lead to a crisp clean look. The text box that appears upon hovering is also quickly recognizable through the medal color choice and provides me the details I want on demand.

Through understanding and examining the visualization more, I found that I could not answer a question that the visualization was begging me to ask, that is “Who currently holds the most amount of medals from 1896 to 2012?” This sort of data aggregation could have been facilitated through a double slider bar at the top of the visualization and would have added value to me as a reader. Also, as I was exploring the visualization, I noticed that the US was not represented in 1980. After a Google search, I realized that we boycotted the Olympics that year. This lead me to ask the question, “Could you have provided headlines on the left or the right of the graphic that explained country performance in the Olympics or, on a lesser scale, explained the anomalies?” Furthermore, it would have been great if I could have clicked on a country and have the graphic zoom in and show me the specific sports the country received the medal in, color coded of course. I also found that the graphic, while working perfectly in Internet Explorer 10, did not work in Chrome v29.

Being able to shrink ten pages of data that is not quickly discernable into one informative visualization is a tough task, a task that was thoroughly accomplished. I hope you found this letter informative and engaging and can pass this on through the team.

Sincerely,

R. Kent Wills