Subject: Critique of Visualization

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September 19, 2013

Matthew Ericson  
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Dear Matthew,

I am a Master’s student in Dr. Ben Shneiderman’s Information Visualization class at the University of Maryland. I am writing to provide my point of view on the effectiveness of the 2012 London Olympics Medal Count visualization (http://london2012.nytimes.com/results).

Overall, I thought the visualization did a great job at showing the top performers of the Olympics based on the size of the circles. Additionally, the visualization provides another dimension with the comparison over years, which makes the overall visualization intriguing and intuitive. Also, after analyzing a few countries, I realized that the placement of the countries is relative to their actual geographic location. After that initial realization, it became easier to find a desired country. Also, the additional detailed medal count table based on categories that changes when clicking a country makes the visualization richer. With that said, I do have some feedback and suggestions which are organized by large, medium, and small issues.

Large issues
In a sense, the visualization seems incomplete. In my opinion, the purpose of the whole visualization is at question. Is it for just viewing medal counts for a given year or to actually do comparisons between Olympics? Since there is a date slider, the first assumption would be that this visualization is for comparisons. However, it lacks true comparison capability. Starting with the purpose of the date slider, yes, we can make comparisons over time. However, it might be more useful if we can select a country and make a comparison with it highlighted. This would show the results over time and reduce the memory load with transition to the change. Additionally, the feature of multi-country selection and comparison should be available. Right now we can only select one country and view the full sport details for it. Finally, a very useful capability would be to have a two-way selection. For example, selecting a single or multiple categories on the table should modify the visualization.

Medium issues
Starting an animation that shows the slider and visualization changing at page load can show how olympics have changed over the years and how participation has increased. Additionally, this gives an introduction to the comparison feature. It would also be nice to switch to another visualization such as a stacked bar chart, where the stacks are the different sport categories. This can show a simplified yet detailed view of the entire data. Also, hovering over countries can show more details, such as sport with highest medal count, how many sports competed in, how many representing athletes or teams.
Smaller issues
Based on what I explained above about the purpose of the visualization, the title should be something similar to “Olympic Results Historically”. There is no separation or distinction between individual and team sports. It would be helpful if, next to the host country on the top left, there can be a count of the total participating countries. Finally, a background map might be helpful to see the placement of countries at first glance.

Thank you for reading my feedback and I hope it can be helpful for future visualizations.

Sincerely,

Hitesh Maidasani