September 19, 2013

Dear Mike Bostock, Shan Carter and Josh Keller:

Good Day! I am a first year PhD student of Prof. Ben Schneiderman and as part of my coursework for “Information Visualization”, I am giving you my feedback on the visualization “Among the Oscar Contenders, a Host of Connections.”

First of all, what an aesthetically pleasing visualization ‘Among the Oscar Contenders, a Host of Connections’ was! I was amazed not only at the elegant design style but also the insight it offered at a quick glance. The visualization adds value in the sense that connections between people (actors, producers, directors) via movies could not have been visible without representing it in a graphical, interactive manner. Mouse over showed more details like the name of the movie, year of release and role for which the person was nominated. Use of colors was done brilliantly with gray dots to show that connected nominee won an award.

However, the visualization made me delve deep into the underlying data which gave rise to a few questions. What was the timeline chosen for all the movies associated with a particular person? The spokes coming out of a person’s wheel showed only limited number of movies, was there some criteria chosen for what movies are going to be in the visualization?

Aesthetically driven
I believe visualizations are very informative and data-driven. But somewhere, I felt that even though the craft was unreal, the visualization failed to provide enough content about each of the nodes (movies). After hovering on the node, more information in the form of movie name and year of release were given. I craved for more information like who won the award if that node did not have a gray dot, what were the other Oscar awards for that movie, and the likes.

Easy Filter (by movies and people)
I wanted to know if you considered having a filter for people (actors, directors, producers) to maybe focus on the ones the user clicked on by highlighting only people associated with a particular movie and graying out rest of the graph which would make processing and understanding of information easy. The reason why I thought about this was because when I was trying to find Steven Spielberg’s Jurassic Park, it took me a while to find out where it was. I wish we could have an easier way to find information which is currently hidden (movie names) on mouse over. Was there a specific reason why you chose to do this?

Apart from filtering by movies, filtering by the different category of people would also help in gathering information about groups of people and deriving value out of it.

Interactions
I also wish as the page loaded, the visualization smoothly transitioned to show how it made this graph; for example, it starts with the movie Lincoln and smoothly edges out to the people connected with it which further edges out to the people and movies they are connected. I propose this feature as I feel this would not burden the user with a lot of information at one go and would sort of take the user smoothly through the process.

There were other minor things I thought could help with the current visualization, for example:
- Details on demand: Users could click on each of the people wheels and get more details about the person about his association with films
- Though I liked the ‘Island of Denzel’ and ‘Outsiders’ representation and terminology, I feel that since they aren’t connected to the rest of the graph, they should’ve been represented with different colors, etc. to give them the distinction.
- The current color usage might be a little problematic for people with color blindness and hence high contrast colors should be used.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you and the entire New York Times Visualizations team for constantly providing us with fascinating visualizations. I hope you find my feedback useful!

Yours Sincerely,
Meethu Malu