September 18, 2013

Dear Mr. Bostock, Mr. Carter, Mr. Quealy and Mr. Ward:

I am a PhD student in Prof. Ben Shneiderman’s Information Visualization class at the University of Maryland. I am writing to you with respect to the visualization you created of NFL draft picks (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/04/25/sports/football/picking-the-best-in-the-nfl-draft.html).

I found the visualization very clear and intuitive. I think that both the expert and the novice (in technology as well as in football) would understand the meaning of the visualization, and how to use it. The use of a slider to choose the threshold of top ranked player is again, easy to use as well as aesthetically pleasant.

Also, I believe that the choice of colors was very good. The top ranked players are spotted instantly, marked in red over the gray background. Also, differentiating between the first round picks and the other rounds using different shades of gray looks very nice.

However, I do have some suggestions that I believe can improve it. First, the method for selecting the “best” players, although very clear and intuitive, was rather hidden in the page. It took me quite some time to find it. I believe it should appear on the same page as the visualization itself, and even if a link is used it should be more visible at first glance, and should lead to a new window, instead of opening the ranking method in the same window, and by that replacing the visualization itself. Second, the players’ names below each year’s chart are too dense, and if there are few high ranked players near one another, only one of the names is visible.

Additionally, I have a few suggestions for additions that might yield further important information. First, I believe there is no reason to limit the visualization to comparison between first round picks to picks in other rounds. One might be interested in similar statistics for any
draft round, or combination of rounds (first and second compared to third and later), or maybe even the top ten (twenty, hundred, etc.) picks. Another interesting differentiation would be between players’ roles. It could be very interesting to see the difference in ranking-pick correlation between different roles. Maybe it is easy to predict who would be a top QB, but hard to predict a top RB?

Two more aspects I, as a user, would like to see in visualizations such as this one, are differentiation of the data by teams, and by head coaches or general managers. I believe it can be a very interesting bit of data to see if there are some teams or managers that consistently pick top players in their top picks. This will further show if the most important part in a successful draft is the manager’s skill, the team’s scouting infrastructure, or simply luck based on coincidental circumstances.

Lastly, I would like to point out that this letter should not be read as a harsh critique, although I had a few suggestions, I think the visualization was very good and interesting. If you would like to discuss my suggestions any further, please feel free to email me.

Sincerely,
Yoav Segev
segev@cs.umd.edu