

CONSTRUCTING VISUALIZATIONS WITH INFOVIS TOOLS - AN EVALUATION FROM A USER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Several information visualization toolkits and tools have been developed to facilitate users work. However, evaluation studies for these toolkits and tools from a user perspective have been overlooked. In this paper, we evaluate 13 information visualization toolkits and tools developed in the last 10 years from a user perspective. For each user type (novice, savvy and expert), we investigated the toolkits and tools using 5 dimensions. This study shows that tools for savvy users—users with basic programming skills and domain knowledge—are lacking, and these users should be supported with more tools to construct advanced visualizations. We outline our approach to how savvy users can be engaged more in the development process and construct advanced visualizations. Information visualization community should focus more on moving the boundary of constructing advanced visualizations from expert users towards savvy users.

1 INTRODUCTION

Several Information Visualization (InfoVis) toolkits and tools ((Fekete, 2004), (Bederson et al., 2004), (Heer et al., 2005), (Bostock et al., 2011), (Spotfire, 2011), (Tableau, 2011), (Omniscope, 2011)) have been developed, especially in the last decade. The purpose is to enhance the visualization development process, provide better presentation of data, and lead users towards novel simple and advanced visualizations. However, constructing meaningful visualizations is not an easy task for users, considering their programming skills. Heer et al. categorize users in three groups: *Novice Users* are the ones with no programming skills but they have the domain knowledge and basically interact with predefined visualizations; *Expert Users* are users with very good programming skills who construct advanced visualizations and have no domain knowledge; and *Savvy Users*, who have some basic programming skills and an understanding of the domain (Heer et al., 2008). Savvy users act as an intermediate between novice and expert users, trying to bridge the gap between domain expertise and programming knowledge.

The vast variety of data types, user tasks and needs, etc., premises that “*one visualization does not fit all*”. Therefore, researchers seek new approaches to construct novel *advanced visualizations*. Advanced visualizations is a broad definition, but in this paper,

we refer to advanced visualizations as those that use position, size, shape and color for data and are programmatically constructed (e.g. LifeLines (Plaisant et al., 1998), SparkClouds (Lee et al., 2010), LifeFlow (Wongsuphasawat et al., 2011)).

In this paper, we investigate 13 InfoVis toolkits and tools, and compare to what extent they can be used by the user. Our findings show that savvy users are neglected by academia and industry, although they are often the most valuable users. To make use of their domain and programming knowledge, new approaches and tools should be developed. Novice users, the main target of commercial tools, are limited to the predefined visualization templates, and expert users are assisted mainly by academia with flexible and customizable libraries. Finally, we outline our approach to how savvy users can be engaged more in the development process and construct advanced visualizations.

2 RELATED WORK

Heer et al. (2008) discuss how new audiences can participate in creation and collaboration of visualizations. Based on user skills, the authors categorize them in three groups: novice, savvy and expert users. For each user type, authors focus on two main aspects of InfoVis tools: exploration-analysis and communi-

cation. Although, the authors present some tools associated with each group, they mainly focus on the collaborative visualization aspect rather than on the construction process of the visualizations.

A recent study (Grammel et al., 2010) investigates how novice users construct visualizations and reflects on how to overcome the barrier of visualization expertise. Their finding shows that there is a need for tools that facilitate novice users in selecting appropriate visualizations and engaging them in an iterative process to refine visualizations. Although this study provides insights for novice users, it does not evaluate toolkits and tools from the novice-user perspective. Our work focuses on all types of users and to what extent they can use the existing toolkits and tools.

Wohlfart et al. evaluated four InfoVis tools investigating their capabilities in visualizing temporal data (Wohlfart et al., 2008). Their findings showed that existing tools are limited in visualizing temporal data and future research should focus in this field. However, this study does not compare the tools from a user perspective, neither how visualizations are constructed.

3 COMPARISON SETTING

3.1 InfoVis Toolkits and Tools

In our study, we selected 13 toolkits and tools developed in the last decade from academia and industry. We searched on the web for commercial InfoVis tools, and selected six most well-known tools in the field: Spotfire (Spotfire, 2011), Tableau (Tableau, 2011), Omniscope (Omniscope, 2011), MS Excel (Excel, 2011), Google Chart Tools (Google-Chart-Tools, 2011) and Many Eyes (Viegas et al., 2007). Secondly, we used ACM Portal and IEEE website to find InfoVis tools and toolkits. Initially, we ranked the results based on the total number of citations, and then we selected only the appropriate ones by reading the abstracts. Finally, we read all the papers and we selected the five most appropriate toolkits: Prefuse (Heer et al., 2005), The InfoVis Toolkit (Fekete, 2004), Piccolo (Bederson et al., 2004), Protovis (Bostock and Heer, 2009) and Improvise (Weaver, 2004). During the process of reviewing the existing literature, we identified two more visualization toolkits —Processing (Processing, 2011) and Flare (Flare, 2011). Due to the fact that Processing uses its own programming language and has a development environment, and Flare is written in ActionScript, we decided to use these tools in our evaluation as well. Due to time constraints, we chose only these tool-

kits and tools, which we believe are a good representative sample from academia and industry. Some of the tools identified in our study, which are not included in this evaluation, but readers may be interested are: D3 (Bostock et al., 2011), Obvious (Fekete et al., 2011), Dave (Vrachnos and Jimoyiannis, 2008), ComVis (Matkovic et al., 2008), Mondrian (Lienhard et al., 2007) and Jazz (Bederson et al., 2000).

3.2 Comparison Dimensions

In this study, we investigated how information visualizations are constructed by the user. Below, we present 5 dimensions that we used to evaluate each toolkit and tool: (1) Who constructs the visualization; (2) What type of visualizations can the user construct; (3) Does it support construction of advanced visualizations; (4) How are visualizations specified and created; (5) Does it have a development environment? We investigated these dimensions for each type of user: novice, savvy and expert.

4 EVALUATION

4.1 Prefuse

Prefuse (Heer et al., 2005) was created at University of Berkley and is developed in Java. Visualizations in Prefuse are constructed using a set of finer-grained building blocks and specifying operators that define the layout and behavior of these blocks. This toolkit is used by expert users, who are skilled java programmers. Expert users can develop simple and advanced visualizations programmatically. This toolkit can be integrated in an Integrated Development Environments (IDE), such as Eclipse, but this integration does not support features such as drag and drop, what-you-see-is-what-you-get (WYSIWYG) panel, and so forth. The purpose of this tool is to facilitate expert users work. However, the user has to have a good knowledge of the toolkit; otherwise complexity may arise even for programmers (Bostock and Heer, 2009). In conclusion, savvy and novice users cannot use this toolkit to construct visualizations.

4.2 The InfoVis Toolkit

The InfoVis Toolkit (Fekete, 2004), developed at University of Paris-Sud, is another Java based visualization toolkit that uses several interactive components to construct visualizations, for instance range sliders. Providing a consistent framework, the InfoVis toolkit

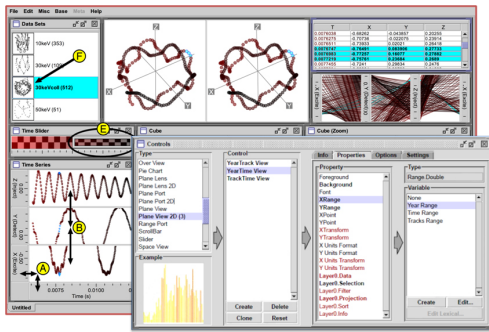


Figure 1: Improvise development environment.

assists expert users in constructing simple and advanced visualizations, which are specified programmatically. Moreover, it allows expert users to extend the toolkit with new components and integrate visualization techniques into interactive applications. However, creating and customizing visualizations requires experienced programmers. Consequently, this toolkit is not appropriate for savvy and novice users. Finally, the InfoVis toolkit, similar to Prefuse (Heer et al., 2005), does not have a specialized development environment, but it can be integrated in IDE such as Eclipse.

4.3 Piccolo

Piccolo (Bederson et al., 2004) was developed at University of Maryland and has a version in Java and C#. This toolkit is mainly used for developing graphical applications with rich user interfaces. Piccolo supports the development of information visualizations indirectly, as it does not support visualization techniques (Heer et al., 2005). Nevertheless, novel visualizations such as LifeFlow (Wongsuphasawat et al., 2011) are based on this toolkit. Users can use visualization functionalities and components, such as zooming, animation and range slider. This toolkit can be used only by expert users, and the fact that it does not support visualization techniques directly, it makes it more challenging even for expert users. Similar to the previous two toolkits, this toolkit does not have a specialized development environment either.

4.4 Flare

This visualization toolkit is the successor of Prefuse (Heer et al., 2005), but is written in ActionScript. Flare (2011) supports expert users with a number of simple and advanced visualizations. To construct a visualization, expert users need to specify in ActionScript the properties of the visual objects (e.g., position, shape, color), and sequential commands to create the visualization. Skillful programmers can also

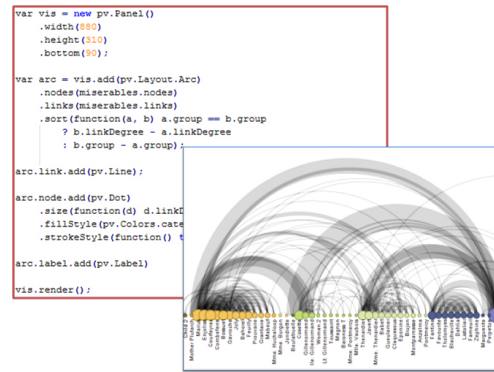


Figure 2: An arc diagram using Protovis.

define new operators and visual objects. However, advanced programming knowledge is required. Flare can be integrated in Adobe Flex IDE and it does not come with a specialized IDE. This toolkit cannot support novice or savvy users in constructing advanced visualizations.

4.5 Improvise

Improvise (Weaver, 2004) is a visualization toolkit for creating multi-view coordination visualizations for relational data. It was developed at University of Wisconsin Madison, and is written in Java. Expert and savvy users can create visualizations by specifying expressions for simple shared-object coordination mechanism. Shared-objects in Improvise are graphical attributes such as color, font, etc. Improvise has a specialized development environment where users can create views by adding frames, controls, defining variables and attaching data using the lexicon work area (a central repository where information related to the data and database are saved). Users can construct simple and advanced visualizations based on the predefined controls. Finally, this tool can be used by savvy users. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of Improvise.

4.6 Processing

Processing was developed initially “to teach fundamentals of computer programming within a visual context” to newcomers, but it has grown into a more complete tool for constructing images, animations and interactions (Processing, 2011). Processing has a development environment, where expert users can type the specification for a visualization and preview the results. The development environment is similar to a regular IDE. To create a visualization, users have to know another programming language, Processing. As a result, this tool is used only by expert users, or

non-programmers who pursue a programmer career.

4.7 Protovis

Protovis (Bostock and Heer, 2009), developed at Stanford University, supports expert users to construct visualizations using its domain specific language. Designers can combine primitive graphical controls, called marks, bind them to data, and specify visual properties. Protovis is implemented in JavaScript, and events can be attached to a mark using anonymous functions. In Protovis, expert users can create simple and advanced visualizations. The authors of Protovis have compared the specifications for a simple pie chart in Protovis, Processing and Flare, showing that the visualization in Protovis is specified in fewer lines of code. Protovis does not have a specialized development environment to support visualization creation. Constructing visualizations in Protovis may be a potential solution for savvy users due to the simplicity of the specifications. Figure 2 shows an arc diagram and a part of the specifications for this visualization.

4.8 MS Excel

MS Excel is a spreadsheet program that allows users to analyze and visualize data (Excel, 2011). With simple steps, users can construct visualizations based on predefined templates (e.g. bar chart, pie chart, etc.). MS Excel users can specify spreadsheet formulas or use standard widgets to construct visualizations in the worksheet area. However, advanced visualizations cannot be constructed by novice users, or by savvy users. Expert users can construct advanced visualizations by means of Macros, which can be integrated in MS Excel.

4.9 Tableau

Tableau (2011) is a commercial visualization tool, the successor of Polaris (Stolte and Hanrahan, 2000) developed at Stanford University. Tableau allows all types of users to create visualizations by dragging and dropping fields onto axis shelves (vertical and horizontal areas) and using visual specifications. Tableau uses VizQL (Hanrahan, 2006), an algebraic specification language, to create views based on predefined templates and bind data to them. Further, it has a powerful interactive development environment where users can interact, filter, sort data and create interactive dashboards. The main users of this tool are novice users. However, they may encounter some challenges during the learning phase, such as mapping data to

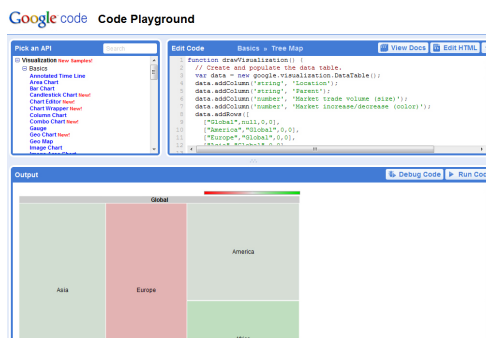


Figure 3: Evaluation results.

visual objects. Tableau is a “black box” system. As a result, expert users do not have access to the kernel of the system and it is not possible to extend the system. Therefore, users can not construct advanced visualizations that are not supported by the tool.

4.10 Spotfire

Spotfire (2011) is another commercial tool for data visualizations. It supports users with a number of visualization techniques, who can interact with the development environment and create visualizations based on predefined ones. Once they have selected the data and chosen the type of visualization, the tool generates automatically the visualization. Furthermore, users can create dashboards, by combining different visualizations (bar chart, scatter plot, etc) in a single screen. As in Tableau, users can not create advanced visualizations except from the predefined ones.

4.11 Omnisciope

Omnisciope (2011) is in the same category as Tableau and Spotfire, and shares similar features such as interactive dashboard, etc. Although it can be used by all types of users, the main scope of this tool is to support novice users in constructing visualizations, as Spotfire and Tableau do. Visualizations are constructed based on predefined templates. Novel advanced visualizations cannot be constructed with this tool. Expert users can not extend the system with new controls or functionalities, as it is a “black box” system.

4.12 Google Chart Tools

Google Chart Tools (2011) is a library written in JavaScript that provides several predefined simple (e.g. line chart, scatter chart, etc.) and advanced chart types (e.g. Image multi color bar chart, Motion Chart Time Formats, etc.). Visualizations can be constructed by expert users in the web-based development environment named Code Playground, Figure 3.

	Who constructs the visualization?	What types of visualizations can the user construct?	Does it support construction of advanced visualizations?	Does it have a development environment?	How are visualizations specified and created?
Protovis	Expert-User	All	Yes	No	Using Protovis
Prefuse	Expert-User	All	Yes	No	Using Java
Flare	Expert-User	All	Yes	No	Using ActionScript
The InfoVis Toolkit	Expert-User	All	Yes	No	Using Java
Piccolo	Expert-User	All	Yes	No	Using Java or C#
Processing	Expert-User	All	Yes	Yes	Using Processing
Google Chart Tools	Expert-User	Predefined	Yes	Yes	Using Javascript
Improvise	Savvy-User	All	Yes	Yes	Using the environment
Spotfire	Novice-User	Predefined	No	Yes	Using the environment
Polaris/Tableau	Novice-User	Predefined	No	Yes	Using the environment
Omniscope	Novice-User	Predefined	No	Yes	Using the environment
MS Excel	Novice-User	Predefined	No	Yes	Using the environment
Many Eyes	Novice-User	Predefined	No	Yes	Using the environment

Figure 4: Evaluation results.

The Code Playground environment increases the likelihood of attracting savvy users, who may find this approach easier to understand and use. In addition, Google Chart Tools has the Live Chart Playground to test charts already created in the Code Playground. In this one, the user can change some parameters and see how the visualization changes. Expert and savvy users are limited to predefined templates and functions, and cannot construct novel advanced visualizations.

4.13 Many Eyes

Many Eyes (Viegas et al., 2007), developed at IBM Research Center, is a web-based visualization platform mainly for novice users. In Many Eyes, visualizations are implemented in Java Applets. Users construct a visualization in three steps: upload a dataset; choose a visualization from predefined ones; customize and publish the visualization. Many Eyes automatically generates and shows the visualization on the screen. Visualizations other than predefined ones are not supported.

5 RESULTS

Figure 4 summarizes the results of our evaluation. Our findings show that academia focuses mainly on supporting expert users to construct novel advanced visualizations. On the other hand, industry markets their products towards novice users, assisting them with predefined visualization templates. Although both communities can benefit from engaging savvy users in constructing better advanced visualizations, savvy users are neglected and not supported as novice and expert users are. Our study shows that only one toolkit, Improvise (Weaver, 2004), may support savvy users in constructing advanced visualizations. A potential toolkit for savvy users may be Protovis (Bostock and Heer, 2009), due to the simplicity of its domain specific language. Finally, the results show

that novice users are supplied with interactive environments where they can drag and drop, get real-time feedback, filter, sort and so forth.

Although there is a need for more creativity in the InfoVis field, existing savvy users can not utilize their knowledge and construct novel visualizations. As a result, the InfoVis community should investigate how savvy users can construct advanced visualizations.

We are developing a solution that deals with the dimensions in this way: (1) **Who constructs the visualization?** We aim savvy users who will be able to utilize both the domain knowledge and their programming skills to produce novel visualizations. (2) **How are visualizations specified and created?** Users can use building-blocks and specify spreadsheet-like formulas that link building-blocks. Spreadsheet formulas have proved to be a successful approach among programmers as well as non-programmers (Burnett et al., 2001). They experiment with them in the development environment and deploy them to novice users. (3) **What type of visualizations can the user construct?** Simple and advanced visualizations can be constructed using relational data, or data transformed into a relational format. (4) **Does it support construction of advanced visualizations?** Specifying spreadsheet-like formulas, which allow properties such as color, position etc. to be data dependent, and using building blocks, we believe that savvy users will be able to combine them in innovative and advanced visualizations. For instance, SparkClouds (Lee et al., 2010) can be composed by combining a SparkLine block with a WordCloud block. (5) **Does it have a development environment?** We are developing a specialized development environment where savvy users can drag and drop building blocks, specify formulas with intellisense, see results live, etc. The development environment facilitates users work, and our evaluation clearly shows that all tools for novice users have one.

To summarize, our goal is to move the boundary in constructing advanced visualization from a programming style towards a more expressive style for non-programmers, by means of *spreadsheet-like formulas*. In addition, we believe that a *specialized development environment* will facilitate savvy users' work even more.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we evaluated 13 popular InfoVis toolkits and tools from a user perspective. This study concludes that present tools do not support savvy users—users with basic programming skills and do-

main knowledge—in constructing advanced visualizations, although their role is crucial. They need different visualization tools to construct advanced visualizations. This study can serve as a brief introduction to newcomers in the InfoVis area. For a deeper understanding, we encourage them to refer to the references mentioned in this paper. Moving the boundary of constructing advanced visualizations from expert users towards savvy users is a research area that requires more the attention of the InfoVis community.

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