ENCYCLOPEDIA WALKABOUTS WITH VISNOMAD A New Visualization Tool Designed as an Aid for Textual Exploration

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Abstract: We present an original visualizer that allows users to travel through the network of pages of an early encyclopedia of computer science. The purpose of this tool is to better understand the relationship between concepts of computer science at an early stage in the development of the field. The visualizer is written in Java, interfaces to a database server, and sports two different graphical representations, a tree and a graph that are logically connected. We present our design goals, our choices of implementations and the challenges encountered.

1 **INTRODUCTION**

How did the appearance of the Personal Computer alter the world of computer science? How did the different areas of research, the technology hot spots change because of it? What areas of computer organization and architecture shifted importance because of the entrance of the PC on the scene? What new areas of interest and research resulted? Such questions are interesting for historians of science, and to help better explore these fugitive and elusive questions we have designed VisNomad, a visualization tool that displays graphically the pages of an encyclopedia of computer science. This tool is primarily a thought tool (Sugiyama, 2002) for one to navigate the *network* of the references linking the pages of Ralston's Encyclopedia of Computer Science. Two different versions of the encyclopedia are used, one published in 1976 (Ralston, 1976) and the other in 1983 (Ralston, 1983), respectively, and fortuitously bracketing the birth of the PC revolution. The ability of the human eye to discern patterns (Schneiderman, 1996), clusters, or hotspots in networks makes this tool a valuable companion for historian explorers.

In this paper we concentrate on the visualization aspects of this investigation. Interested readers should see (Owens, 2009) for the report on the historical exploration.

The data visualized is the alphabetical listing of

entries of both editions of the encyclopedias. Each entry of the encyclopedia forms an *item* in our data set, and the references the entries make to other form the *links* between the different entries. Each entry is accompanied by the number of columns of text associated with it, the number of references it makes to other entries, and the number of related subjects. These quantities provide valuable information as the full-text electronic version of the pages is not available.

VisNomad is written in Java, and uses Java Webstart technology. It can be used as a stand-alone application or as an applet accessible on the Web. The data are stored in an SQL server, and are dynamically retrieved by the visualizer as users roam the network of encyclopedic entries.

The visualizer offers three different paths for exploring the entries of the encyclopedias:

- The first one is a standard keyword search-box (à la Google),
- the second one is a three-level alphabetical list of all the entries forming a tree, with each entry as the root of a sub tree of entries that are directly linked to it, and
- the third one is a two-dimensional graph depicting entries connected by spring-loaded links floating in a force-field layout.

Figure 1 shows the full visualizer and the different

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Figure 1: Visualizer window showing the entry for *Interrupt*, in a hierarchical tree on the left, the graph on the right, and the search bar at the top.

components.

In the next subsection we present our objectives for designing VisNomad. The subsection that follows presents similar and related visualization projects and highlights the differences with our approach.

1.1 Design Goals

Our design strategy is to create a system where the user's attention is taken logically top-down and from left to right, in a simple but effective "1, 2, 3" approach where continuity of cognition is maintained. We also want to follow Shneiderman's long recommended design guideline (Schneiderman, 1996) for effective visualization: "Overview first, zoom and filter, then details-on-demand."

The result should be a tool that sports Ware's stated objectives for effective information visualization systems, which are reworded in our context below.

- *Comprehension*: The visualization must provide the ability to comprehend how the 400 entries in the encyclopedia relate to each other, plus how they aggregate, cluster, and contribute to form a self-contained body of knowledge.
- *Perception*: The visualization must reveal properties of the relationships between computer science concepts that were not anticipated.
- *Quality control*: The visualization must make it easy to discover problems in the data. (This item is of lower priority for us, as the data set is fairly small and easy to validate.)
- *Detail* + *Context*: The visualization should facilitate understanding of small scale features in the context of the large scale picture of the data.
- *Interpretation*: The visualization supports hypothesis formation, leading to further investigation.

Finally, the aesthetics of the visualizer is an impor-

tant component of its design (Sugiyama, 2002) and a guiding force during its conception.

1.2 Data

The data are collected from Ralston's encyclopedias and consist of 476 entries linked by 2,333 references for the 1976 edition (Ralston, 1976), and 551 entries connected by 2,714 references for the second edition (Ralston, 1983) of 1983. For each entry we also have the number of columns of text it contains, the number of references made to other entries, and its number of related subjects.

1.3 Related Visualizations Projects

A good survey of the various techniques of visualizations for graphs can be found in (Herman et al., 2000), and covers many of the types discussed here, including *force-field layouts*, *radial graphs*, and *tree-maps*.

A collection of documents connected to each other by explicit links, such as references, form a *Knowledge Management System* (Maier, 2007), also referred to as KM system, or KMS. An encyclopedia is a knowledge management system. According to Trier (Trier, 2005), a KMS can include up to four different types of knowledge entities: *process/activities, documents, individuals*, or *topics*. Our visualizer and its data fall in the category of a topics KMS. KM focusing on individuals and activities are refereed to as *social networks*, and many visualization tools have been developed and proposed in this area in recent years. *Ontologies* are also knowledge management systems, close enough to our effort to warrant our interest in visualization projects that target these systems.

Possibly the closest visualizing tool in spirits to our own is Jellyfish (Horn and Jenett, 2005). It is an unpublished project that has been recognized and documented by several Web aggregation services, such as Infovis-wiki.org, which specializes in cataloguing interesting visualization tools. The Jellyfish Website states that "[t]he project should be seen as an experiment, which deals with a dynamic interface. The purpose [is] to remove a static, conventional design and to achieve a playful interface." Written in Processing (Fry, 2008), the visualizer is open-source and allows the user to interact with various "blobs," or jellyfish, that float on the screen and represent different areas of the arts. Clicking on a jellyfish transforms it into a ring of nodes where each node represents an important artist or work of art in a given field. Each field is represented by a jellyfish. The artists or art works from a given field, when selected by the user, may become linked to other artists or art-works in other jellyfish, creating a growing network of connected blobs on the screen. Additional information about graphic elements is given in the form of pop-ups containing short text descriptions. While playful, smooth, and aesthetically pleasing, the visualizer can show only a small number of jellyfish on the screen. Furthermore the jellyfish can contain only a few tens of nodes and only explicitly selected relationships are visible, making the geography of the full network not easily understandable.

Several viewers presenting networks of words have also been proposed and are of interest to us. We select two representative examples, both designed for the Wordnet project (Fellbaum, 1998): the Visual Thesaurus, a commercial package, and Wordnet Explorer.

The Visual Thesaurus made by Thinkmap (Thinkmap, 2007) is a visualizer that allows users to specify a word in a search box, and in return displays a force-field laid out graph. The graph shows the word and its many derivations and definitions as nodes connected by edges representing semantic connections. The data mined by the visualizer are extracted from the Wordnet database (Fellbaum, 1998) at Princeton. Users interact dynamically with the graph, moving nodes around, and collapsing and expanding the graph at will, in a very fluid and intuitive way. Text boxes containing various definitions pop up when words are clicked. Thinkmap has also released several software development kits (SDK) to help users create similar visualization for her own data. Unfortunately both the visualizer and the SDK collection are available only on a commercial basis. Nevertheless, the Visual Thesaurus presents a polished interface and is a good example of an effective word-based visualization worth emulating.

Also mining Princeton's Wordnet database is Wordnet Explorer which "applies visualization principles to lexical semantics" (Collins, 2006). It is richer in its offering of visualization types than its many Wordnet-based counterparts, and allows users to use spring-loaded, force-field based layouts, animated radial graphs, and tree-maps to explore words and semantic associations. This richness of the visualizations reveals the difficulty of presenting in one visualization the intricacies of the relationship existing in the data.

Skillmap (Meyer and Spiekermann, 2006) is a KM system focusing on individuals, their skills, and showing their organization in a hierarchical structure. People and skills form nodes of a graph, and "who-knows-who" and "who-knows-what" relationships form the edges between the nodes. The goal of this tool is for managers to discover through visual

means possible parallel developments in the same organization. The choice for displaying the network of individuals is also a spring-loaded force-field laid out graph. The interface is smooth and playful, and written in Java using the Prefuse tool kit (Heer et al., 2005).

Possibly the most versatile, do-it-yourself visualization system available today is IBM's Many Eyes (Viegas et al., 2007), which is a project aimed at creating out-of-the-box Web-based visualizations that can be used by researchers to explore data sets in many different visual forms, with the least amount of programming. "The goal of [Many Eyes] is to support collaboration around visualizations at a large scale by fostering a social style of data analysis in which visualizations not only serve as a discovery tool for individuals but also as a medium to spur discussion among users." Many Eyes is a successful attempt at making visualizing data a simple task for researchers, and many variants of visualizations are available. Unfortunately, Many Eyes does not allow the integration and linkage on one page of several different visualizations of the same data set, which is a feature we are pursuing for our visualizer.

Finally, we mention *word trees* (Wattenberg and Viegas, 2008) as an example of a hierarchical expression of a collection of words or sentences linked together, visually close to our vertical tree representation of the links between the encyclopedia entries. The algorithmics needed for Visnomad is simpler, as the tree depth is fixed for all entries, while that of word trees is not, as the trees represent prose.

While all these different projects are rich in features we seek, none offers a full set of the ones we require: open-source code, smooth integration of different views of the data in a linked fashion, and Web deployment.

We cover our implementation of VisNomad in the next section, and continue with a section on validation. We conclude the paper with projected enhancements for the visualizer.

2 THE GRAPHICAL USER INTERFACE

VisNomad is written in Java and makes extensive use of the Prefuse tool kit, which we have chosen for its wide grass-root adoption in many visualization projects, and the richness of data representations it offers, including graphs, force-field layout, *fish-eye views*, trees, *radial graphs* and *tree-maps*. Also important for its adoption is its open-source distribution policy, and the Java platform which makes it possible to deploy as an applet on the Web, or as a stand-alone application compatible with all three major computing platforms.

Our visualizer's main window is divided into two areas, as depicted in Figure 1, one vertical, on the left-hand side, containing a tree, and one more wide than tall, on the right-hand side, containing a twodimensional graph of the network of entries. The tree is three-levels deep. Its root is a single point, representing the whole encyclopedia, and all the level-one nodes, its children, form the alphabetical list of all the entries in the encyclopedia. Each entry is in turn the root of a sub-tree containing the alphabetical list of the entries that either reference this root, or that are referenced by this root, a concept we revisit in a later paragraph.

Representing the encyclopedia as a vertical alphabetical list (tree) responds to a natural aspiration for humans to understand and navigate a collection of terms, and has been suggested by Sugiyama as a structural rule (Sugiyama, 2002) that should be adopted for data visualization of this type of information.

The tree and the graph provide collaborative and coordinated views for the user. The tree can be expanded or reduced at will, while entries selected in the tree can be made to appear in the right panel at the center of a network showing all their direct neighbors, as Figure 2 illustrates.

Our goal is to provide users with intuitive and logical paths of exploration in a way not practically possible with the printed encyclopedia itself. One approach enables users to search for a particular key word, reduce the tree to only the subtrees containing that keyword, and explore any of the visible entries in their network environment. Another approach allows users to start exploring the encyclopedia by reading the vertical alphabetically organized entries, reduce the tree to only the sub-tree of interest and then display the graph equivalent to the sub-tree. These two modes of exploration requires the user's focus to move from top to bottom, and then left to right, in a logical and intuitive manner.

Smooth animation accompanies the collapse and extension of the trees, as well as the organization of the graph, including zooming in and out, preserving continuity of cognition.

We now describe the different features of the visualizer, starting with the data encoding.

2.1 The Data

Each encyclopedia is stored in its own database in the form of the *adjacency matrix* of the directed graph

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(a) Selecting "Interrupt" in the tree.



(b) Collapsed tree, and expansion of network of entries centered around "Scheduling Algorithm."

Figure 2: Transitioning left to right: the user selects an entry in the tree, and expands it into a network.

created by all the entries as nodes, and all the references between entries as *edges*.

2.2 Three-level Tree

The user can peruse the tree by adjusting a vertical slider, and can select one particular sub-tree, rooted at one of the entries. The leaves of the sub-tree con-

tain not only the entries referenced by the root of the sub-tree, but also the entries referencing that root. We have found through experimentation that discovery is facilitated when we remove the direction from the referencing action. For example, if the *Central Processing Unit* page references the *Interrupt* page, and if in turns *Interrupt* references *Deadlock*, then both *Central Processing Unit* and *Deadlock* will be listed as



(a) Full Tree

(b) Collapsed Tree

Figure 3: Left: the tree as first presented to the user. Right: once the user clicks on one of the children of the interrupt entry.

children of Interrupt sub-tree.

When the user enters a keyword in the search bar, all the subtrees that do not contain the keyword are eliminated, leaving only subtrees that contain the keyword, either in the root or leaf entries. All the actions pertaining to operations intrinsic to the tree are performed with the left mouse button.

The right mouse button is used to expand a node of the tree into a spring-loaded graph layout in the right panel of the window. Note that the above remark about *Interrupt*, *Central Processing Unit*, and *Deadlock* is true here as well, as the graph is directed. The graph created is fully interactive, allowing users to:

- zoom in and out of the graph,
- move the graph around,
- zoom the graph to fit the window,
- move nodes around to untangle the graph,
- click on nodes to automatically add all their missing neighbors as new nodes, and
- backtrack through the history of node expansion to return to a previous state of the graph.

Most of these features are leveraged and adapted from the Prefuse tool-kit which provides many algorithms for these graphic manipulations.

The visual identification of community structures in the data is effectively enhanced by the resulting tool.

2.3 Visual Attributes

Several visual attributes adorn the nodes of the tree and of the graph. For the tree nodes, we use two different colors for the border of each box surrounding the entry and for the inside of the box. The border color is used to identify nodes that may contain keywords, or that have been visited by the user. The inside color is taken from a gradient of colors representing the betweenness centrality (Dekker, 2008) of each node in the network, with darker colors corresponding to more central nodes, and lighter colors for peripheral nodes. The border color is used to identify the nodes that have been visited, creating a visual path of the exploration. Nodes also temporarily change border color when they happen to be the node currently under the mouse pointer, or any one of the direct neighbors of that node. Highlighting the direct neighborhood of a node of interest is an effective way of identifying neighborhoods.

Another visual attribute controls the size of each node of the graph. Sugiyama's *semantic rule* (Sugiyama, 2002) sets the size of the nodes to reflect the number of direct neighbors it has, that is the number of encyclopedia entries that reference it directly, or the number of entries it references. With Visnomad we use the out-degree of each node to control the size of each node, indicating directly by its size whether the entry lists many related-subjects in its text.

Finally we mention *backtracking* as a feature of the visualizer that was requested by users. Backtracking allows users to "undo" their last node-expansion operations in reverse order (LIFO) of trigger. A *stack* is used to keep track of the state of the graph at various points of the exploration.

2.4 Database Connectivity

Prefuse supports very simple database connectivity. However, because of strict security issues, Java applications are extremely restricted in the way they access remote resources, such as databases. Such access requires the use and complex setup of certificates, which we find prohibitive for our purpose. Instead we use a Php tunnel, i.e. a Web page in Php that acts as a CGI script to obtain data from the database. The Java engine passes Web access requests generated by the visualizer to the CGI script, and receives back tables containing entries and links that are rendered as subtrees or sub-graphs. Masquerading the access to a remote database as a simple access to a Web URL is effective and fast. Each of Ralston's encyclopedias is stored in its own database, the name of which is either passed to the applet as a parameter embedded in the host Web page, or selected at start up. Other parameters are passed to the visualizer from the host Web page, including the color scheme used for rendering the different data attributes.

In the next section we present an evaluation of our visualizer.

3 EVALUATION

The constantly evolving and self-adjusting spring embedded visual layout is pleasing to interact with, and has been shown in published research to receive positive feedback from users (Meyer and Spiekermann, 2006) (Meyer et al., 2005).

One of the computing limitations is the time complexity of force-based layouts. For a graph of Nnodes connected by E edges, the time complexity is $O(N \ln N)$ or O(E), whichever is greater, making the display of large graphs of more than a few hundred nodes impractical and jittery, since animation is used and many frames are displayed per second. Fortunately, the distance filtering feature we have implemented allows the user to explore large graphs while showing only a subset of it on the screen, and, overall, we have found that long exploration of the graph remains a pleasant operation for the user.

3.1 Using the Visualizer as an Historical Tool: Example and Perspective

In this section we report in the use of the tool by its intended user: a historian. The data reported is subjective, and limited mostly to one individual's exploration, as well as the presentation of the tool at professional meetings of the society of historians of science, most recently (Owens, 2009).

Historians are fascinated by the origins of the personal computer. Given the fact that our understanding of its origins is influenced by our current vantage point (In some sense we cheat in knowing the end of the story!), we decided to use the first two editions of Anthony Ralstons authoritative Encyclopedia of Computer Science and Engineering to explore the intellectual landscape of computer science at a time when the PC was just emerging. The first edition of 1976 appeared when virtually no PCs existed, the second edition of 1983 two years after the appearance of the IBM Personal Computer and the beginning of a period of dramatic growth.

In principle, it seemed possible to acquire a sense of the disciplinary "lay of the land" by reading both editions cover to cover, taking note of the "Related Subjects" listed at the head of each entry. Linkage groups the near neighborhoods of especially interesting entries were even sketched by hand in this initial exploration. It became apparent, however, that exploration of any depth -to second- and third-order neighborhoods and beyond- was practically impossible without digitization and the assistance of sophisticated visualization techniques. The development of VisNomad made it possible not only to visual these further neighborhoods, but to "walk around" the entire virtual space of these two encyclopedias in a lively and convenient manner that reveals unanticipated perspectives and helps unravel the tangled web of associations that defined the intellectual landscape of computing in the 70s and 80s.

Results of this initial reconnaissance have been encouraging and surprising. In spite of its status as one of the great inventions of the modern age, in the company of Watts steam engine, Edisons incandes-



Figure 4: A historian takes a walkabout from Interrupt to Input/Output Devices, traversing the universe of Computer Architecture.

cent lamp, and the transistor of Bardeen, Shockley, and Brattain, the PC of recent accounts was nowhere to be found. What we did find in our promenades is not the mythical Great Invention or its associated Great Inventor, but a diffuse and growing fascination with machines that were becoming smaller, more powerful, mobile, and user-friendly serving as increasingly intelligent nodes in larger, more elaborate networks.

This somewhat surprising observation, based on the virtual exploration that VisNomad has made possible, suggests an alternative to the master narrative that currently organizes much computing history. This is a machine-based account that starts with Babbage and his Analytical Engine, proceeds to Holleriths punched-card machinery and IBMs office equipment, before passing on to the stars of the story, World War Twos ENIAC and its machine progeny EDVAC, Univac, and a growing family of mainframes, minis, micros, and, eventually, the personal computer. The problem with this master narrative is two-fold: first, it ignores the fact that the ideas and technologies relevant to personal computing were widely-diffused in the community; and, second, it leaves time sharing, the Arpanet, Internet, and World Wide Web awkwardly positioned on the margins of the central story.

An alternative account would take its cue from James Benigers *The Control Revolution* (Beniger, 1986) and focus on the evolution of technological systems and networks, beginning with the telegraph, the railroads, the emergence of universal power systems like Chicagos Commonwealth Edison at the beginning of the 20th century, AT&Ts national telephone network, and the SAGE air defense system of the early Cold War. Within this alternative narrative and its ramifying networks–from WANs to LANs and the computerization of office systems, the awkwardness of the master narrative disappears and the "PC" reappears as a small, smart, and convenient node, a coherent part of a larger story.

4 CONCLUSIONS

We present an original attempt at investigating history through visualization of the interrelationship that exist between the entries of an encyclopedia. The exploration is supported by an interactive and dynamic visualization written in Java. Users are presented with two different means of perusing the entries, one hierarchical and alphabetically organized, the other twodimensional, interactive, and dynamic, presenting the network of reference patterns existing between the pages of the encyclopedia, and highlighting clusters, neighborhoods, entries that are peripherals, or those that have high degrees of connectivity, and that represent important subject matters.

Although subjective, our preliminary exploration of the encyclopedias with the visualizer has shown that it matches several of Ware's objectives for effective visualization, in particular comprehension, perception, and interpretation.

We leverage many features of the Prefuse tool-kit and implement key recommended design rules that have been proposed in the literature for effective, aesthetic and pleasant visualizations.

This tool is work in progress, and several enhancements and options are planned as a response to early user feedback. We list below some of the options considered.

- We implemented both *Jordan* and *betweenness centrality* measures (Dekker, 2008) for each entry of the encyclopedia and selected the latter as the one representing more intuitively the relative importance of the various computer science concepts present in the encyclopedia. A deeper analysis of other measures of centrality (such as *maxflow*, or *closeness centralities* (Sugiyama, 2002)) might prove better suited at representing the key players and the shift of importance that different editions of the encyclopedia might reveal.
- Obtain the licensing rights to the full-text of the encyclopedias so that the contents of the entries can be browsed in the visualizer, either inside a separate window or panel, or as part of a pop-up dialog.
- While Prefuse is a fine tool-kit, it is significantly large, making the download of applets a timeconsuming activity. The development and maintenance of Prefuse has stopped, and a new Flash version of the tool-kit has been released. Flash is based on ActiveX, runs on a small footprint less than a megabyte, supports vector graphics, and many other features that make it integrate seamlessly in Web pages. Porting the visualizer to Flash is a logical step for future development.

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