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Applying Bifocal Displays to Data Visualisation

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Abstract

Rapid advances in communications and computer technologies in recent years have provided users with greater access to large volumes of data from computer-based information systems. The issue of the relatively small window through which an information space can be viewed brings with it two associated problems: presentation and navigation. This research is based on an approach called the Bifocal Display proposed by Spence and Apperley to address these inherent difficulties common in large information spaces in modern computing environments. The essence of this presentation technique is to provide the user with detailed local content as well as a global context to facilitate navigation.

In this research, the original one-dimensional Bifocal Display concept has been extended in two-dimensional form to deal with two fundamental types of large information spaces: those with a high information density, for example, large databases and spreadsheets, and those with inherent spatial relationships, such as topographic maps and networks. An experimental study has been carried out to study the usability of the Bifocal Display and other presentation techniques based on various implementations of the London Underground map. Results have shown that the Bifocal Display is a usable and effective approach for the presentation of large information spaces.

Presentation techniques can be broadly classified into distortion-oriented and non-distortion-oriented; the former generally requires more computational resources than the latter. With the increasing processing power of personal computers, researchers have developed a variety of novel distortion-oriented presentation techniques. Unfortunately, the distorting appearance resulting from the application of these techniques, coupled with the growing number of new terminologies used by researchers, has caused some confusion to the graphical user interface designer. A taxonomy of

distortion-oriented techniques based on their magnification functions has been proposed to facilitate the identification of the similarities and differences of these techniques. A conceptual model has also been put forward to unveil the underlying principles which govern their operations.

Despite the variety of novel presentation techniques currently available, the choice of a technique in a particular application remains very subjective; there is a general lack of selection guidelines or methodologies. An evaluation framework E^3 has been developed to provide a basis for the comparison of different presentation techniques, given the nature and characteristics of the data to be presented, and the interpretation required. E^3 focuses on three aspects of graphical data presentation: expressiveness, efficiency and effectiveness. This framework lays the foundation for the development of a set of metrics to facilitate an objective assessment of presentation techniques.

A general visualisation tool, the InfoLens, has been designed based on the theoretical framework of this research. The design of the InfoLens has further demonstrated that the Bifocal Display is an effective approach to visualising large information spaces.

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Contents

| | | |
|------------------|--|-----------|
| Chapter 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 | Accessing large information spaces | 1 |
| 1.2 | Motivation for the research | 7 |
| 1.3 | Objectives of the research | 8 |
| 1.4 | Approach adopted | 8 |
| 1.5 | Outline of the thesis | 9 |
| | | |
| Chapter 2 | A Brief Overview of Human-Computer Interaction and Graphical Presentation | 11 |
| 2.1 | Human-computer communication | 12 |
| 2.2 | Communication media in HCI | 13 |
| 2.3 | Graphical user interfaces | 20 |
| 2.4 | Graphical presentation of data | 25 |
| 2.5 | Review | 29 |
| | | |
| Chapter 3 | The Bifocal Display | 31 |
| 3.1 | The Bifocal concept. | 32 |
| 3.2 | Applying Bifocal Displays to topological maps | 36 |
| 3.3 | A comparative study of graphical user interfaces for topological maps | 44 |
| 3.4 | Subjective evaluation: Experiment 1 | 47 |
| 3.5 | Critical evaluation | 54 |
| 3.6 | Objective evaluation: Experiment 2 | 56 |
| 3.7 | Review | 60 |

| | | |
|-------------------|---|------------|
| Chapter 4 | A Taxonomy and Conceptual Model of Distortion-Oriented Presentation Techniques | 61 |
| 4.1 | Introduction | 61 |
| 4.2 | A review of distortion-oriented presentation techniques | 64 |
| 4.3 | A taxonomy of distortion-oriented presentation techniques | 78 |
| 4.4 | A conceptual model | 81 |
| 4.5 | Discussion | 83 |
| 4.6 | Conclusion | 88 |
| | | |
| Chapter 5 | The E³ Model | 91 |
| 5.1 | Introduction | 92 |
| 5.2 | Presentation of large data sets | 93 |
| 5.3 | E ³ : the framework | 98 |
| 5.4 | Discussion | 101 |
| 5.5 | Concluding remarks | 106 |
| | | |
| Chapter 6 | Designing the InfoLens | 107 |
| 6.1 | The Lens Metaphor | 108 |
| 6.2 | Design considerations | 115 |
| 6.3 | Final design and illustrations of the InfoLens | 118 |
| 6.4 | Implementation issues | 133 |
| 6.5 | Review | 135 |
| | | |
| Chapter 7 | Conclusion | 137 |
| 7.1 | Summary of thesis | 137 |
| 7.2 | Review of the InfoLens | 139 |
| 7.3 | Original contributions | 140 |
| 7.4 | Future research work | 141 |
| | | |
| References | | 145 |
| | | |
| Appendix A | Experimental Data on Graphical User Interfaces for Topological Maps | 159 |
| | | |
| Appendix B | Mathematical Derivation of Transformation and Magnification Functions | 173 |

Figures

| | | |
|-------------|--|----|
| Figure 3.1 | The display of a two-dimensional information space. | 33 |
| Figure 3.2 | An electronic diary as it appears on the Bifocal Display, with the current week in the central region. | 34 |
| Figure 3.3 | Locating a journal article with the Bifocal Display. | 35 |
| Figure 3.4 | Split screen display of the London Underground map. | 39 |
| Figure 3.5 | Implementation of a two-dimensional Bifocal Display. | 41 |
| Figure 3.6 | Bifocal Display of the London Underground map and the Melbourne Metropolitan Railway map. | 42 |
| Figure 3.7 | Scrolling view of the London Underground map. | 46 |
| Figure 3.8 | Subjects' relative preferences for the five interfaces. | 50 |
| Figure 4.1 | A taxonomy of presentation techniques for large graphical data spaces. | 62 |
| Figure 4.2 | Transforming an elliptical object using the Bifocal Display technique. | 65 |
| Figure 4.3 | A rectangular grid is to be mapped onto a confined space by applying a distortion-oriented technique. | 66 |
| Figure 4.4 | The polyfocal projection. | 68 |
| Figure 4.5 | The Bifocal Display. | 69 |
| Figure 4.6 | A typical magnification function for Furnas's "Fisheye View". | 71 |
| Figure 4.7 | Analysing the Perspective Wall. | 74 |
| Figure 4.8 | The Perspective Wall. | 75 |
| Figure 4.9 | The Fisheye View. | 77 |
| Figure 4.10 | A taxonomy of distortion-oriented presentation techniques. | 78 |

| | | |
|-------------|--|-----|
| Figure 4.11 | The 25 regions that would be generated by extending a two-dimensional Bifocal Display to incorporate three distinct magnification levels, rather than two. | 79 |
| Figure 4.12 | The magnification function of a piecewise Fisheye View. | 80 |
| Figure 4.13 | The effects of stretching the rubber sheet. | 82 |
| Figure 4.14 | A common problem with multi-focus presentations. | 86 |
| Figure 4.15 | An application of the combined spatial and information enhancement technique using a Bifocal Display. | 87 |
| Figure 5.1 | Two common approaches in presenting large data sets. | 96 |
| Figure 5.2 | Stages involved in designing a presentation system for large data sets. | 99 |
| Figure 5.3 | Example diagrams as used by Sparrow (1987). | 103 |
| Figure 5.4 | A summary of analysis of the two examples. | 105 |
| Figure 6.1 | The problem with a magnifying lens. | 109 |
| Figure 6.2 | An electronic version of a magnifying lens using a one-dimensional Bifocal Display. | 110 |
| Figure 6.3 | The three canonical manipulation operations of a rectangular magnifying lens. | 111 |
| Figure 6.4 | Different views generated by manipulating the electronic magnifying lens. | 112 |
| Figure 6.5 | The interface of the InfoLens. | 119 |
| Figure 6.6 | Three representations of the data as the representation button is progressively activated. | 121 |
| Figure 6.7 | The operation of the special cursor for adjusting the column width or row height to show the hidden data. | 122 |
| Figure 6.8 | The menu and dialogue box for specifying an integrated view. | 123 |
| Figure 6.9 | The dialogue box for specifying the Lens Filter. | 124 |
| Figure 6.10 | A typical view of a financial database through the InfoLens. | 128 |
| Figure 6.11 | A multi-focus view of the same database. | 128 |
| Figure 6.12 | A multi-focus view showing time-series data. | 129 |
| Figure 6.13 | An integrated view of the multi-dimensional data using Chernoff faces | 130 |
| Figure 6.14 | The lens filter highlights stocks with a dividend yield of 6% or higher. | 131 |
| Figure 6.15 | The lens filter highlights stocks with a dividend yield of 6% or higher and a price to earning ratio of 14 or lower. | 131 |
| Figure 6.16 | A presentation and comparison of the data stored in the container. | 132 |

Tables

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| Table 3.1 | A critical evaluation of the five interfaces based on five display criteria. | 55 |
| Table 3.2 | A critical evaluation of the five interfaces based on tasks. | 55 |
| Table 3.3 | A summary of task completion times in seconds of the 34 subjects in Experiment 2. | 58 |
| Table 3.4 | A summary of the number of uncompleted tasks for each of the four interfaces. | 58 |
| Table 6.1 | An excerpt from a financial database. | 126 |

Publications

The following publications have been prepared in the course of this research:

1. Leung, Y.K. (1989): Human-computer interface techniques for map-based diagrams. In *Advances in Human Factors/Ergonomics* , Vol 12B: Designing and using Human-Computer Interfaces and Knowledge Based Systems, (Eds. Salvendy, G. and Smith, M.) Amsterdam, Elsevier, 361-368.
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5. Leung, Y.K. and Apperley, M.D. (1993): E³: Towards the metrication of graphical presentation techniques for large data sets. In *Lecture Notes in Computer Science Vol 753: Human-Computer Interaction*, (Eds. L.J. Bass, J.G. Gornostaev and C. Unger) Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 125-140.
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