The Design Space of SparkWords

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Abstract

The design space of SparkWords is consistently-sized words; embedded in sequential text (e.g. prose, lists); embellished by adding data, including categoric, ordered or quantitative data, that is encoded by a variety of attributes (singular or multiple) applied to words or letters. The breadth of the design space is illustrated with historic examples and novel implementations.

CCS Concepts

\begin{itemize}
  \item Human-centered computing → Visualization techniques;
  \item Applied computing → Document searching;
\end{itemize}

1. Introduction

In this technique paper we organize the design space of SparkWords. SparkWords are consistently sized words used in-line in prose. Words or letters are enhanced with additional data, including categoric, ordered or quantitative data. The encoded data is associated with the word and represented with common visual attributes (e.g. hue), typographic attributes (e.g. font \textit{weight}, \textit{italics}, \textsc{CAPS}), or graphical elements (e.g. bars \textit{behind} or \textit{lines} below).

Our contribution is to define the design space of SparkWords (Section 3) based on historic and infovis examples (Section 2). We provide novel examples including a) embedding multiple extrinsic data attributes into words to provide more contextual information in prose (4.1.1); b) using the same visual attributes from a visualization in the associated narrative to facilitate cross-referencing (in 4.1.2); c) more perceptually accurate mapping of quantitative data (4.1.3); d) glyph-level formatting to indicate data relative to a portion of a word or code, (e.g. hierarchical data 4.2.2); and, e) use in prose, lists, and tables (4.3).

2. Background

SparkWords are different than:

(a) Markup. SparkWords go beyond traditional markup of text (e.g. highlight keywords in context e.g. \cite{Luh59, Hea09}) or code syntax highlighting \cite{BM90}, by: (i) encoding multiple simultaneous data attributes into a word (e.g. hue, weight and italic), (ii) manipulating glyphs individually, (iii) allowing for more accurate encodings of quantities by using lengths superimposed against words.

(b) WordClouds. WordClouds \cite{Fei10} depict individual words without the contextual narrative text \cite{Nie09} and embed quantitative data \cite{FFB18}. SparkWords are in-line in prose context and encode additional data types. Further, most WordClouds use size to encode quantitative data. SparkWords are consistently sized with adjacent text; this maintains text layout without adjusting line heights, line lengths or reflowing text.

(c) Word-scale Visualizations. Sparklines were popularized by Tufte \cite{Tu96} and are now pervasive, e.g. in libraries \cite{Mee18} and...
fonts [Gal17]. Various researchers, e.g. [GWF14,BW17,GBW117] review hundreds of variants of word-sized visualizations and identify uses to show quantities, proportions, locations, trends, time, ranking and relations; means of relating the graphics to the text by visual cues such as underlines, highlights and frames; and interactions such as brushing, linking and overlays. Instead, with SparkWords, data is embedded directly into semantically associated words.

There are many historic examples of SparkWords, such as: (i) differentiation of text to facilitate skimming prose, such as medieval illumination of lead characters ordered black, red, blue, gold (Figure 2a [Unk50]); 16th. C. textbooks mixing blackletter, italic and roman type (2b, [War24]); 19th. C. instruction manuals using bold and caps to create ordering (2c, [Bro79]); (ii) rapid access to different classes of content (e.g. reference texts, fig. 2d, [Mic00]); and (iii) visualizing syntax (e.g. software code [BM90]).

Modern publications manipulate type to convey additional intent, e.g. Fry’s Frankenstein (2011) with procedural font selection; comic books with semantic lettering (e.g. digitalcomicuseum.com); and Ronell’s post-modern text. Term to differentiate look-alike drug names to reduce prescription errors (e.g. vinCRIStine vs. vinBLAStine) [FPGG04,Gab06].

There are hundreds of text visualizations, (e.g. Text Visualization Browser, textvis.lnu.se), although most are not specific to narrative text. FatFonts vary font weight per character so that the ink varies in proportion to the numeric value represented [NHC12]. FatFonts are limited to numerals: they do not extend to alphabetic characters. Variable Text Scaling scales text across entire lines for a magnification effect (Figure 2a [Unk50]), but size variation is not commonly used by typographers in running text as it creates gaps of white space, disrupting typographic color. Size variation is used in some infovis (e.g. [SSDK12, WLM14, Wea15]), but size variation is not commonly used by typographers in running text as it creates gaps of white space, disrupting typographic color [WS09]. Figure 1b was an early attempt to use size variation to encode data which received negative feedback from typographers: it disrupts reading by size, by extra wrapping, and it disrupts typographic color.

3. Design Space of SparkWords

Based on historic examples, infovis and text visualization research, the design space can be defined:

- **Word.** SparkWords are encodings applied to words: these encodings do no exist independent of the word.
- **Layout.** SparkWords are embedded into word sequences such as narrative, lists, tables and other sequence layouts.
- **Scope.** The format can apply to a word or two, down to syllables or single glyphs within a word.
- **Data Type.** The encodings support categoric, ordered and quantitative data.
- **Visual Attributes.** There are many visual attributes available, including traditional visualization attributes such as hue and intensity (see [CF13] for a comprehensive list) and typographic attributes (see [BB16,Bra18] for overview).
- **Multiple Attributes.** Attributes can be combined in a single word to redundantly encode data or encode multiple data attributes.

There are some constraints:

- **Legibility** is a perception issue concerned with the ability to clearly decipher individual characters as well as commonalities within a font that increase letter identification [SD12]. Attributes which make text illegible should not be used: e.g. brightness reduces text contrast, reducing legibility; blur and drop-shadows reduce the clarity of letterforms, reducing legibility.
- **Readability** is a comprehension issue concerned with the ease of reading lines and paragraphs of text [Tra03]. Word format affects reading (e.g. [GFD19]), e.g. blakletter if legible but difficult to read.
- **Not Size.** Sparkwords are used in-line in text, lists etc. Text size variation is used in some infovis (e.g. [SSDK12, WLM14, Wea15]), but size variation is not commonly used by typographers in running text as it creates gaps of white space, disrupting typographic color [WS09].

4. Design Experiments

The permutation space is enormous: dozens of attributes, in multiple combinations, across scope from glyph to words, and three different data types implies many thousands of combinations. A design space can be tested by creating instances across each parameter (e.g. [Berf7, BLB17]): we create examples across scope, data type and layout.

4.1. Example SparkWords at Word Level

4.1.1. Categoric

Encoding binary categories with text has many existing use cases, such as keyword in context (in search applications), hyperlinks on web pages, etc.
Multiple Attributes: Many visual attributes are mutually exclusive: formats can be combined to show multiple different categoric attributes (as occurs with cartographic labels, e.g. Ordnance Survey [Hod99]). For example, attributes of politicians can be encoded as textual attributes. Donald Trump can be shown as a right-leaning conservative via right-leaning text, and male gender via light blue. Politicians with multiple terms of service could be indicated with bold, for example John McCain or Nancy Pelosi. In this example, four attributes are indicated per name: literal text, color, weight and slope.

4.1.2. Ordered

Examples such as Skim Formatting [BB16] or Variable Text Scaling [SSDK12] encode ordered data about the words relative to their document context using font weight, width, or size. This can be more broadly extended to data beyond the words in their context. In many sparklines, the viewer is not given an explicit legend but the decoding can be inferred: e.g. labeling the starting and ending value of a sparkline indicates vertical scale. With more generalized SparkWords a legend is required if the viewer is intended to decode the values, as given directly in the narrative text immediately prior to the city names in figure 1a.

Single ordered values: In figure 1a, five different weights of text are ordered to indicate population. The viewer can read the text sequentially, or visually skip to the heaviest weights for the largest values, as given directly in the narrative text immediately prior to the city names in figure 1a.

Multiple ordered values: Like map labels (e.g. [SH25]), SparkWords can show more than one ordered variable. In figure 3, weight and color indicate four different ordered data attributes. The encoding is explained inline facilitated with histograms indicating data range and distribution per variable.

SparkWords cross-referencing a visualization: A consistent mapping of visual attributes between SparkWords in narrative explanations of visualizations can facilitate cross-referencing and reduce learning effort (i.e. the same encoding applies to both uses) without reliance on interaction [LLB18] (in some uses, interaction is not feasible or slow). In figure 4, a heatmap is paired with a narrative paragraph where the SparkWords use the same weight and hue as the corresponding cells in the heatmap.

4.1.3. Quantitative

Varying hue, brightness or font weight provides only a few ordered levels on words at typical reading size (e.g. [War00]). For more accurate quantitative encoding, a visual attribute such as length can allow for more discrete levels to be comprehended [Ber67, HB10]. Length across the span of a word or two can be indicated by varying the length of a visual attribute across a subset of a word. E.g.:

The popularity of Star Wars characters is lead by Darth Vader at 16 million page views (Wikipedia), indicated by the length of the underline. This is more page views than the next top three characters combined: Obi-Wan, Luke, and Princess Leia. Rounding out the top characters are Han Chewbacca B2-D2, and C-3PO. Underline length is not constrained to full characters - formats can be cropped based on data. Thus, Princess Leia’s underline extends fractionally under the n in princess.

Cropped lengths can be used with other formats. For example, background color is more visually dominant than underlines: Darth Vader. Luke’s, Princess Leia, and B2-D2. Shaded bars behind text is an approach already familiar from tools, such as Microsoft Excel. Here, the approach is generalized to running text.

Figure 1e uses bold to indicate a range of estimated book sales (read from left to right), e.g. Barbara Cartland, has higher sales than Sidney Sheldon.

4.2. Example SparkWords at Glyph Level

In western languages (e.g. English, Greek, Arabic, Cyrillic), words are composed of separate characters (i.e. glyphs), each of which can be encoded with additional data.

4.2.1. Categoric

Individual glyphs can represent data about words. Silenc colors silent letters red, which are visibly removed with a physical transparent red filter [MMR12]. Going further, figure 1f shows English words where ph may be explicitly pronounced, one letter silent (light), or pronounced differently (superimposed red letter).

4.2.2. Ordered

Shimabukuro shows crowdsourced abbreviations with retained glyphs shown by font size [Shi17]. Instead of size, font width could

Figure 4: Heatmap with associated narrative where both use the same hues and weights to facilitate cross-reference.

Figure 3: Paragraph of ordinal SparkWords with encoding explained in-line.
be used. Here, letters dropped in common contractions are indicated using a narrow font, such as BROOKLYN, PHILADELPHIA, and WASHINGTON DC.

Frequency of letters spelled incorrectly in words can be shown with x-height (the intermediate height of lowercase letters), e.g. esseTreillar, governoFloncoes, occasionally, and successfully. For example, the tall second c in occasionally indicates it is frequently misspelled; and ern are frequently misspelled in government.

Coded hierarchies are frequently used by experts, e.g. financial markets, electrical grid equipment, product codes, etc. Figure 1d, is an example using NAICS industry codes. NAICS is a five digit hierarchy: e.g. 51 is the information sector, 515 broadcasting, 5125 pay media, 51521 pay TV. Each digit is colored by the changes at each successive level (bright red for big decreases, bright green for big increases) and font weight indicates size relative to peers at that level (thin < 10%, 10-40%, 40-90%, 90+% heavy). Expert users do not require descriptions: they know the codes. This enables a dense line of SparkWords to summarize data in a few words, e.g.: The biggest contributors are: 11221, 22111, 32742, 41111, 51521, and 62132. For non-experts, details can be exposed with a tooltip, or expanded to readable phrases as in Fig. 1d.

4.2.3. Quantitative
Small spark bar charts are used in sports to summarize the results of a series of games, such as small bar charts used by Tufte [Tuf96] or this example summarizing the New York Yankee’s 2018 season (from baseball-reference.com): NY2018 season chart. The chart shows the win/loss sequence (red/green) and score differential (bar height), but does not indicate the opposing team.

Baseball games are played in a series of two to four games per opponent. All teams have mnemonic three letter codes, e.g. NYY for the New York Yankees. Each letter can represent each successive game over the season. For example, the Yankees started the season with a 4 game series vs. Toronto (TOR4), where outline indicates win/loss (green/red) and fill height indicates score differential (a low fill is a loss by one run, a full fill is a loss by 10 or more). The Yankees then win 22 of the next 33 games: TOR, BAL, BOS, DET, MIL, TOR, MIN, the Minnesota Twins, Oakland A’s and Boston Red Sox in sweeping series against Tampa, Minnesota, L.A., and Cleveland.

Three variations are shown in figure 1c. First is filled letters. Second is a tall thin font over a lightly shaded background bar, similar to prior superimposed tag clouds [LRKC10, LBSW12], although SparkWords are in narrative, and bars are per letter. The third provides high contrast between type and background - e.g. useful in sunlight or low quality print.

4.3. Layout
In addition to narrative, SparkWords can be used in:

Alphabetic Lists: The bottom half of figure 3 shows 90 departments in alphabetic order. The viewer can 1) read the list sequentially; 2) find named departments using the ordering to facilitate search; or 3) focus on a visual attribute (e.g. blue or heavyweight) to identify departments with that characteristic.

Spatial Lists: Figure 5 shows top hashtags in NYC, set out as a list, ordered to geolocate each topic by highest frequency. Rather than a tagcloud with variable sized words randomly placed on a map (e.g. [NTST11]), this layout offers: (1) Location: Every word is placed on its location (note Wall Street, MOMA and the underlying map). (2) Text is in lines, facilitating reading of sequences of words (e.g. MOMA is beside art, Wall Street is adjacent to Brooklyn Bridge, etc.) (3) Weight is a preattentive cue, e.g. the density of text from midtown to downtown is clearly visible.

Figure 5: Top hashtags in NYC located in proximity to highest frequency of use, e.g. wallstreet and brooklynbridge near bottom.

Table: SparkWords also work within the confines of cells in tables, e.g. figure 1g shows top foods where calories are indicated by weight, water by underline, caffeine in green, sodium in red and cholesterol in blue. Unlike column-aligned, height-constrained word clouds [FFB18], this table includes semantics associated with rows and columns, and multiple encoded values.

5. Conclusion
SparkWords build on prior work and generalize their use to encode categoric, ordered or quantitative data; across letters, words or phrases; with single or multiple encodings; in various layouts. There are many applications, including: increased information density in data dense applications (e.g. finance); visually-facilitated cross-referencing between narrative and visualization; data-enhanced text to provide additional context; and glyph manipulation to reduce prescription errors or aid language learning.

There are many areas for future work. SparkWords do not require interaction, but could be enhanced with interactions [GWFI15, LLB18]. Different fonts and formats have semantic affect which has not been considered. There are many types of evaluations that should be done - detection, legibility, readability, comprehension, user acceptance, and so on.

References


[Bro79] BROTHURSDON: Rules & regulations for the conduct of the traffic and for the guidance of the officers & servants in the employment of the Great Western Railway Co., Advertiser Steam Presses, 1879. 2


[Mic00] MICHELIN P. F.: Guide Michelin. Michelin, 1900. 2


[Unk50] UNKNOWN A.: Part of the Collections and Archives at the Department of Typography and Graphic Communication, University of Reading, Courtesy of University of Reading, 1350. 2


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