The Zen of Data Visualization

By David Speranza | October 7, 2014

Welcome to the 0.4 percent—of data visionaries

From his seat on the cramped couch in a jam-packed Seattle Convention Center lounge, Nelson Davis gazes at the hundreds of Tableau Conference attendees navigating the cluttered space around him.

"There are 5,500 Tableau users here," he says, "and there are only twenty Zen Masters. That's…"

He does a quick calculation.

" .. less than 0.4 percent. Pretty incredible. Having been brought in that class of people is very humbling."

Davis, along with fellow Slalom employee Peter Gilks, was still processing being selected for the 2014 class of Tableau Zen Masters, an elite group of seven who were joining thirteen alumni from 2012 and 2013.

Zen Masters are selected by Tableau employees and customers, who vote for each year's outstanding practitioners of the company's software. They are recognized for their deep understanding of data visualization, their expertise as Tableau educators, and the innovative ideas and designs they bring to Tableau's global user base.

"It's a great concept," says Gilks—not just for himself but for the wider visibility it brings to both Tableau and Slalom, which is currently the only company in the world with two of its own Zen Masters.

For Gilks, a data visualization and discovery consultant in Slalom's New York office, this was something he'd aspired to since first hearing about the honor in 2012. It was also a source of inspiration—"Something to keep me going," he says—especially when it came to regularly producing content for his award-winning blog, Paint By Numbers, whose cutting-edge visualizations were instrumental to his Zen Master designation.

"We're living in a very data-driven world," says Gilks, "and it's only becoming more so. Tableau makes that data accessible and enjoyable."

Fellow recipient Davis agrees. "Data visualization," he says, "is the only way to begin to understand copious amounts of data. It brings data to life."

An information management consultant in Atlanta, Davis currently leads Atlanta's Tableau team while using his own blog, The Vizioneer, to share his creative insights into the world of viz creation. That includes April's 30 for 30 series, which spotlighted a new tip or trick every day of the month.

Getting creative with data

The ability to take complicated formulas and create a clean, clear, story-driven presentation is essential to conveying messages to people and companies who need to grasp the big picture. But, as the work of these two stats junkies shows, it involves far more than just wrangling data. That point was driven home during the conference's opening keynote, where the words *Data Analysis Is a Creative Process* were projected across a giant screen.

Both Davis and Gilks cite Hans Rosling's viral sensation, " 200 Countries, 200 Years "—a fast and fun history of economic progress from 1810 to 2010—as a prime example of the creative ways in which data can be presented to tell an entertaining story.

A good viz, according to Gilks, allows people to see their business or customer base more clearly and, just as importantly, from different angles. That's one of the many benefits of Tableau's graphic interface, which incorporates simplicity, click-and-drag functionality, and an ease of exploration that encourages building visualizations on the fly.

"You can make things as complicated or as simple as you want," Davis says. "I can create a dashboard in seconds. It allows you to fail fast."

Learning from the masters

The two newly anointed masters admit to having learned a lot from previous Zen Masters, as well as regularly gleaning new techniques from other blogs and websites. Davis feels the level of his work has risen dramatically since joining Slalom, where the open exchange of ideas—including regular chats with Gilks—has taught him that even Zen Masters don't have all the answers.

Regarding their own philosophies about what makes a good design, Gilks feels it's about keeping things clear and accessible.

"I don't want to make it look difficult by getting overcomplicated," he says. "A viz should be engaging but not frightening. I like to make things that make people smile, so they're at least slightly entertaining."

His favorite example in his own work is his dashboard, " I (Heart) NY Skyscrapers," which presents all of Manhattan's skyscrapers chronologically and by height, including images of each building and its place on the map.

Davis' mantra is simple: "Design things people *want* to use, not things people *have* to use. I always try to enable my end user with the most functionality possible in a dashboard."

His viz, " Who REALLY Won the Big Game?" is a good example. An attempt to track Super Bowl commercials and their revenue over the course of the 3½ hour game, its colorful, uncluttered interface includes the ability to filter by brand and quarter as well as play back every high-priced ad.

Davis especially likes to make his designs fit the environment for which they're intended by following a company's own visual guidelines. It's an approach Gilks also subscribes to.

"It should be holistically integrated within itself and exhibit the personality of the brand," he says. "It can't just look nice. It must also be truly useful."

Looking ahead

As to the significance of being named a Tableau Zen Master, Gilks hopes it allows his team at Slalom to continue their momentum, with Tableau business increasing dramatically in the coming year. He's also grateful for the chance to provide inspiration for his fellow colleagues.

"Using Tableau put my career in a new direction and opened me up to a new community of like-minded people," he says.

Davis believes the title brings with it a larger responsibility, and he doesn't plan to rest on his laurels.

"People keep telling me, 'Congrats, don't stop doing what you're doing,'" he says.

That means using his newfound status to teach others, push his skills to the next level, and continue trying to do things with data he's not sure are even possible.

"I'm hardheaded enough to think I can come up with a solution to anything," he laughs.
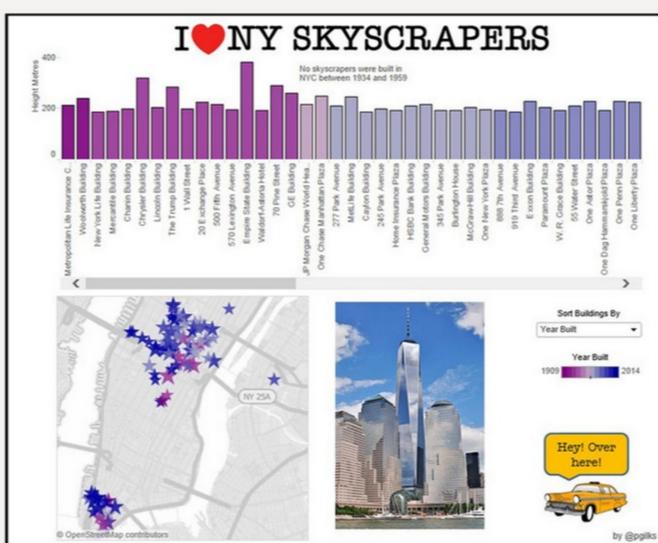
PETER GILKS has always loved making lists. He first became interested in numbers while playing Top Trumps in his native England, a card game "every English schoolboy plays" and which involves matching fields of measurements within chosen themes. After studying statistics in college, Peter went on to produce publications on traffic patterns for England's Department of Transport, where he learned to create visualizations that would stand out on a busy minister's desk. From there he moved on to Barclay's, creating attention-grabbing customer insight visualizations tied to marketing and strategy. In 2009 a coworker introduced him to Tableau, helping him realize the full power of data visualization and making work fun for the first time.

NELSON DAVIS' mother was a teacher, which encouraged his own passion for teaching, speaking to crowds, and experiencing "the lightbulb moment." Until three years ago he was a transportation civil engineer in the greater Atlanta area with no background in data or statistics. When an assignment required him to make a dashboard with live data, he quickly Googled "dashboard" and "live data," then downloaded a trial copy of Tableau. Within a day he'd created his first dashboard and realized how much he loved the experience. With no other formal training in Tableau beyond a couple of advanced user classes, his guiding principle when designing dashboards is, "Innovate or die."

SLALOM CONSULTING

Slalom designs and builds strategies and systems to help our clients solve some of their most complex and interesting business challenges. We put people first. Every individual we hire us becomes part of our fabric, weaving their talents and perspective to the greater whole of who we are.

CONNECT@SLALOM.COM

Offices

Atlanta	Houston	Portland
Boston	London	San Francisco
Chicago	Minneapolis	Seattle
Dallas	National	Silicon Valley
Denver	New York	Southern California
Hartford	Phoenix	