Analysing and designing visualizations – Diagrammatics (1984) revisited

Clive Richards, Yuri Engelhardt

This paper reviews how the authors’ current framework – the DNA of visualization – has evolved from the work laid out in Diagrammatics (Richards, 1984). The goal of this line of work was, and is, to enable the analysis and specification of an extensive range of different types of visual representations of information, such as statistical charts, maps, family trees, Venn diagrams, flow charts, texts using indenting, technical drawings and scientific illustrations. Inspired by an analogy with language, fundamental possibilities of graphic organization were identified in 1984. This work has been further developed into the current DNA of visualization framework. We identify the main concepts within the current framework and point to their roots to the 1984 work.

1 Introduction

This paper is about the development of a framework that may support designers in the creation of charts, diagrams or other visualizations. By defining the fundamental building blocks of such visual encoding systems, and their various combinatorial possibilities, the framework can be used to explore design choices, deconstruct visualizations, and guide visualization research. This work is presented here along with the origins of this research in 1984, the relevance of which has grown
with the more recent surge of interest in visualizations and their design. The goals of our current work remain close to those set out in the 1984 work:

The particular objectives of the work are to:

1. Propose a terminology for discussing diagrams.
2. Provide a scheme for analysing the structure of diagrams.
3. Identify the fundamental modes of graphic organization found in diagrams. (Richards, 1984, 1/4)

Quotations from Richards (1984) appear throughout this paper, referenced from here onward by the page number only (formatting: ‘chapter/page’ as in the original work).

2 The original diagrammatics and its offspring

If the nature, use, and history of diagrams as a subject of inquiry needs a name then I propose that ‘diagrammatics’ almost suggests itself. (2/15)

1984 will be forever synonymous with George Orwell’s grim predictions for that year of a dystopian society (Orwell, 1949)\(^1\). Whatever else was actually going on in 1984, for one of the authors of this paper, Clive Richards, it was a milestone year in his research. In that year he submitted his doctoral thesis to the Royal College of Art, London, following an investigation conducted there under Professors Bruce Archer and Herbert Spencer. The graphic designer, Ken Garland, and the design researcher, Linda Reynolds, were his advisers. Professor Michael Twyman of Reading University was the external examiner. Richards adopted the term ‘diagrammatics’, using it as the title of his thesis (Diagrammatics; Richards, 1984 – pdf available at: diagrammatics.com).\(^2\)

In the late 1990s the other author, Yuri Engelhardt, while doing research at the University of Amsterdam under Professor Remko Scha\(^3\), built on this earlier work for his own PhD thesis, The Language of Graphics: a framework for the analysis of syntax and meaning in maps, charts and diagrams (Engelhardt, 2002)\(^4\) – see Figure 1. One of Engelhardt’s external examiners was Clive Richards.

Both authors now continue their research jointly. This has led to the synthesis, further development and refinement of their investigations, and to the creation of the ‘DNA of visualization’ (Engelhardt & Richards, 2018, 2020, 2021; Richards & Engelhardt, 2020; Richards & Engelhardt, forthcoming). Most core concepts in Diagrammatics, and most of the associated terms, feature in the new theoretical framework. Some of the original concepts have been further refined in the development of the extended scheme, and in some cases alternative names have been adopted.

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1 Many ideas and expressions from Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four are now embedded within our culture, e.g., Room 101, Big Brother is watching you, thought police. The term ‘Orwellian’ is popularly used to refer to deception by officialdom, mass surveillance and violations of freedom of speech in totalitarian societies.

2 The term ‘diagrammatics’ appeared in another context in 1932, as the title of a book (Hutchins & Adler, 1932) containing a series of philosophical riddles or linguistic puzzles by the philosopher Mortimer Adler, each accompanied by a line drawing of nude figures by the artist Maude Hutchins.

3 Remko Scha was professor of computational linguistics at the University of Amsterdam (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Remko_Scha). He writes “The observable characteristics of the human capacity for language and thinking are consistent with the hypothesis that thinking happens largely diagrammatically.” [translated from Dutch] (Scha, 2005).

4 “I want to thank […] Clive Richards for his phonebook-sized thesis titled ‘Diagrammatics’, which I read while trying to live in a cave on the Canary Islands. While rats were chewing holes into my inflatable mattress, Clive’s book made a lasting impression on my thinking about graphic representation.” (Engelhardt, 2002, p. xi)
In this paper the co-authors outline their joint work, with a backward glance to the original Diagrammatics from 1984 that lies at its foundation.

3 Parts of graphical speech – an analogy with language

The relational meaning of a diagram is taken from the arrangement of its elements, and in this respect it is akin to a sentence or text. Although we can distinguish between sentences and diagrams, in that amongst other things the former have a one-dimensional, one-directional scheme to order their elements, and the latter have the potential to utilize fully two (or even three) dimensions, both make use of a grammar to establish their meaning. (10/2–3)

The original Diagrammatics thesis proposes a “grammatically-based analysis” (10/3), for example, the reader is invited to “Consider Figure [2] which may be thought of as saying, ‘A is connected to B’. We might then say that ‘A’ is the equivalent of a grammatical subject and its connection with ‘B’ is the predicate; thus, the line serves a verb-like function for the nouns A and B.” (3/21)5

5 The idea of connector lines serving a verb-like function has been explored later by Malihe Alikhani and Matthew Stone in ‘Arrows are the Verbs of Diagrams’ (2018).
In line with this idea, Graham Wills writes that “a visualization can be defined by a collection of ‘parts of graphical speech’, so a well-formed visualization will have a structure, but within that structure you are free to substitute a variety of different items for each part of speech” (Wills, 2012, p. 22). Our current work includes a ‘universal grammar’ that describes how ‘parts of graphical speech’ can be combined. We have devised a system for specifying these syntactic relationships through grammar-based, colour-coded tree diagrams for describing the compositional syntax of different visualization types (Richards & Engelhardt, forthcoming).

4 Graphic organization through visual encoding:
   arranging, linking, varying

[…] modes of organization […] can be used to express the ideas of association, sequence, and value, and have the graphic characteristics of grouping, linking, and variation, respectively. (0/9)

[…] these organizational modes may be exhibited by various graphical means […] derived from Bertin […] To these I have added the possibilities of enclosure, proximity, alignment, connectivity, which one might think of as being species of grouping and linking. (8/5)

A single significant element may contain several characteristics, each capable of having different relational meanings ascribed to it. These characteristics will be termed, relational features. (9/1)

The grammatical approach of the original Diagrammatics informed the development of the mode of organization, which concerns the graphical means of expressing ‘relational features’, categorized into grouping, linking and variation. In our current work we now refer to these ‘relational features’ as visual encodings which we divide in a similar way – arranging, linking and varying. Visual components can be arranged spatially, linked by adding configurator components, and varied regarding their visual properties:

- **Arranging** components spatially can be achieved by positional encodings such as grouping by position, positioning on a coordinate axis, nesting, orcoupling by adjacency, in order to construct a meaningful configuration.
- **Linking** components can be achieved by adding configurator components, such as connector lines or boundaries, resulting in the visual encodings connecting or grouping by boundary.
- **Varying** components visually can be achieved by encodings regarding visual properties, such as colour coding or sizing.
In our approach, **visual encodings** include not only the use of Bertin’s (1967) ‘visual variables’, but also Gestalt principles of perception. **Colour coding** and **shape coding** use the Gestalt principle of ‘similarity’. **Connecting** is an application of the Gestalt principle of ‘connection’. **Grouping by position** can be achieved either through spatial proximity – using the Gestalt principle of ‘proximity’, or through spatial alignment – using the Gestalt principle of ‘continuity’. Our **visual encodings** also cover some of Johnson’s (1987) and Lakoff’s (1987) ‘image schemata’, concepts from Tversky’s (1995) ‘cognitive origins of graphic conventions’ and Ware’s (2008) ‘graphical codings’ (for a description of how our approach relates to all of these, see Engelhardt & Richards, 2018).

A visual component can be involved in **several different** visual encodings simultaneously, often representing different types of information.

An overview of visual encodings, categorized into **arranging**, **linking** and **varying**, is given in Figure 3, along with explanations and examples.

### 5 The DNA of visualization

In our joint work, the 1984 **mode of organization** has been extended and renamed as the **mode of visual encoding**, which includes not only the **visual encodings** themselves, but now encompasses the comprehensive catalogue of building blocks that make up the **DNA of visualization**.

#### 5.1 ‘DNA’ and ‘species’ – a metaphor for visualization

In their ‘Tour through the Visualization Zoo’, Jeffrey Heer et al. (2010, p. 60) say that “all visualizations share a common ‘DNA’ – a set of mappings between data properties and visual attributes such as position, size, shape, and color – and that customized species of visualization might always be constructed by varying these encodings.” We use this metaphorical idea of the “DNA” and “species of visualization” in a similar vein, taking it to the extent of identifying a comprehensive set of DNA building blocks that specify different ‘visualization species’, and the rules for combining these building blocks. This allows for the construction of a broad range of different types of visualization – Heer’s “customized species of visualization”. The DNA building blocks of ‘visualization species’ in this biological metaphor correspond to the ‘parts of graphical speech’ in the linguistic analogy discussed above. We will refer to these building blocks as ‘VisDNA’.
### Visual Encoding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual Encoding</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Picturing</strong> <strong>PIC</strong></td>
<td>Shows configuration and visual appearance of entities or scenes in the physical world (existing or imagined), using methods such as perspective projection.</td>
<td>Pictorial/technical illustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mapping</strong> <strong>MAT</strong></td>
<td>Shows locations within the two-dimensional layout (typically horizontal) of physical configurations (existing or imagined), using methods such as cartographic projection.</td>
<td>World map, street map, floor plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positioning</strong> <strong>AXX</strong></td>
<td>Shows quantities or points in time by arrangement along an axis with a measurement scale.</td>
<td>Scatter plot, timeline, clock face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proportional space-filling</strong> <strong>PSF</strong></td>
<td>Shows proportions of a total by sizing and arranging portions (or repeating and arranging blocks) into a contiguous total surface area.</td>
<td>Pie chart, treemap, stacked bar, waffle chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ordering</strong> <strong>ORG</strong></td>
<td>Shows order by arrangement into a sequential spatial order, or into spatially ordered levels of indenting.</td>
<td>Comic strip, bump chart, ordered list, indented hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grouping by position</strong> <strong>GRP</strong></td>
<td>Shows category membership by spatial proximity or alignment.</td>
<td>Rows and columns in a table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coupling by adjacency</strong> <strong>ADJ</strong></td>
<td>Shows the presence of a given relationship between two entities by placing one visual component next to another visual component (from the same set). In the case of a linear non-branching sequence of components, we speak of ordering rather than coupling by adjacency.</td>
<td>Icicle diagram, sunburst diagram, Nassi-Shneiderman diagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nesting</strong> <strong>NES</strong></td>
<td>Shows the presence of a given hierarchical (or sequential) relationship between two entities by spatial containment (of one visual component within another (from the same set)). Usually, nesting comes with grouping by boundary and it is the boundaries (around components) that are nested (creating levels of containment).</td>
<td>Treemap, circle packing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connecting</strong> <strong>CON</strong></td>
<td>Shows the presence of a given relationship between two entities through the use of a configurator component that establishes a pathway between two visual components (from the same set), e.g. two symbols connected by a line or arrow.</td>
<td>Flow chart, family tree, network graph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grouping by boundary</strong> <strong>BOB</strong></td>
<td>Shows category membership (or the presence of a given relationship between two entities) by grouping visual components using a configurator component such as a demarcating line, enclosure or shared background.</td>
<td>Venn diagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sizing</strong> <strong>SIZ</strong></td>
<td>Shows quantities or order by varying the surface area of visual components.</td>
<td>Bar chart, word cloud, size-ranked symbols on a map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repeating</strong> <strong>REP</strong></td>
<td>Shows quantities or order by the use of multiples of visual components.</td>
<td>Isotype, dot plot, dot matrix chart, waffle chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gradient coding</strong> <strong>GRA</strong></td>
<td>Shows order by the use of gradated differences in brightness or saturation, transparency, fuzziness, etc.</td>
<td>Heatmap table, brightness gradient on a map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Colour coding</strong> <strong>COL</strong></td>
<td>Shows category membership by the use of colour.</td>
<td>Coloured lines on a subway map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shape coding</strong> <strong>SHA</strong></td>
<td>Shows category membership by the use of shape.</td>
<td>The outline shapes of signs in a traffic sign system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. In this context, ‘components from the same set’ means components fulfilling the same general function in a visualization.
2. When the exact locations are meaningful for all the points on a demarcating line, enclosure or shared background, we do not regard those as grouping by boundary, but as line locators or surface locators (e.g. country borders or areas on a map).

**Figure 3** Visual encodings, categorized into arranging (red), linking (pink), and varying (blue). Picturing involves arranging into a configuration as well as varying visual appearance, hence the combination of red and blue colouring.
5.2 The main groups of VisDNA building blocks

The VisDNA building blocks fall into several main groups – these main groups and their relationships are shown in Figure 4. We have given each group a colour code. These groups are: *types of information* to be represented (grey DNA), *visual encodings* to represent them (red/blue/pink DNA), *visual components* that make up the visualization (green DNA), and any *directions* or *layout principles* that may be involved (black-on-white DNA). In addition to colour coding, every VisDNA building block has a three-letter code, as shown in Figures 3 and 6. These codes have been devised for the convenience of auditing visualizations, a process introduced in section 10.

![Figure 4](image.png)

*Figure 4* This basic overview diagram shows the main groups of VisDNA building blocks and how they relate to each other: *types of information* in terms of the questions they answer, possible *visual encodings* (listed separately in Figure 3), *visual components* (listed separately in Figure 6), and *layout principles* that may be used in a *visualization species*.

5.3 Visualization species

We refer to a ‘well-formed’ combination of building blocks, i.e., one that follows the VisDNA grammar rules (Richards & Engelhardt, forthcoming), as a *visualization species*. Tamara Munzner (2014) uses the term ‘vis idiom’ in a similar sense. Many common *visualization*
species have been given a name (e.g., ‘pie chart’) and are generally referred to as ‘chart types’, while novel or rare visualization species often do not have a name (yet). As Heer et al. (2010, p. 67) write, “many more species of visualization exist in the wild, and others await discovery.” There is, however, no standard for classifying visualization species (chart types). For example, does using vertical bars versus horizontal bars constitute a different type of chart? Does a chronological ordering of bars versus an ordering by value constitute the same type of chart? There are many ways to ‘draw the lines’ between species, subspecies or variants of species, and most of the differences between these can be identified by differences in their VisDNA. We have analyzed a large number of visualization species using the VisDNA system, including most of the corpus at datavizproject.com plus many other examples. Example analyses can be found on our accompanying website: VisDNA.com

An aspect of visualization that largely falls outside the VisDNA framework is the prescription of ‘rules for good design’. Like academic work in linguistics, the framework is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive, in the sense that it enables the understanding and modelling of (graphic) language.

6 Visual components

A significant element is the primary unit of analysis in the scheme to be proposed here. […] I take the view that there seems to be little profit in using such items as an individual dot or line as a unit of analysis. If we are going to use linguistics as a model, then what is needed for present purposes is not the pictorial equivalent of a phoneme or morpheme but something closer to a noun phrase […] A significant element is, then, literally any single graphic element in a diagram which signifies something or which at least is capable of having some meaning. (3/13)

What were referred to in 1984 as ‘significant elements’ that make up visualizations, we now define as visual components. A visualization consists of one or more sets of visual components, of which at least one set is involved in one or more visual encodings. See Figure 5 for an example of a chart disaggregated into its visual components. The chart shows the development of products manufactured by a machine tool company. The small drawings of machines are visual components that are involved in three types of visual encodings – picturing, colour coding, and connecting with directed connector lines. A list of the different types of visual components (green DNA) can be found in Figure 6.
Figure 5  A chart showing the evolution of Miyano machine tools is disaggregated here into its various visual components. (Image courtesy of Citizen Machinery Miyano Co Ltd.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pictorial components</td>
<td>Pictorial components show entities or scenes in the physical world (existing or imagined), using representational methods such as perspective.</td>
<td>Technical illustration, Isotype chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual components</td>
<td>Textual components are the constituents of natural and formal languages, including numbers and mathematical notation.</td>
<td>Word cloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connector lines</td>
<td>A visual component that connects two other visual components is a connector line, unless the description for bands applies (see below).</td>
<td>Network graph, Family tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed connector lines</td>
<td>If a connector line comes with an indication of directionality then it is a directed connector line (e.g. arrows, lines with color gradients).</td>
<td>Flow chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bands</td>
<td>A band shows changing quantities through differences in width along its length, achieved either by width variation along a single band or by splitting or converging with regard to a cumulative width.</td>
<td>Stacked area chart, Minard's map of Napoleon's march</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>A boundary is a demarcating line, enclosure or shared background that serves to achieve grouping by boundary. When the exact locations are meaningful for all the points on a demarcating line, enclosure or shared background, we regard it as a line locator or a surface locator rather than a boundary.</td>
<td>Venn diagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line locators</td>
<td>A line locator is a visual component that defines a line, where the exact locations are meaningful for all the points on the line.</td>
<td>Rivers on a map, Lines on an electrocardiogram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface locators</td>
<td>A surface locator is a visual component that defines an area within a visualization space, where the exact locations are meaningful for all the points within the defined area.</td>
<td>A blue area representing a lake on a map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disks</td>
<td>A disk is bounded by a circular edge. It uses sizing and/or it is composed using proportional space-filling.</td>
<td>Bubble chart, Pie chart, Donut chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocks</td>
<td>A block may or may not be part of a grid structure, but it always has the shape of a grid cell in either a regular grid or – in case of a curved block – in a polar grid. If the description for bars applies (see below), it is not a block.</td>
<td>Cells in a heat map, Outer bounding box of a tree map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bars</td>
<td>Bars use sizing of length, away from a fixed ‘foot’ and/or shared baseline (usually representing ‘zero’), and all bars in a set do this in the same direction (ver, hor, rad, ang).</td>
<td>Bar chart, Population pyramid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range markers</td>
<td>Unlike bars, range markers do not have a fixed ‘foot’, but they always span two points positioned along a coordinate axis, representing an interval between two values.</td>
<td>Gantt chart, Dumbbell chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partitions</td>
<td>Proportionally sized partitions are arranged to fill a given contiguous surface area, using proportional space-filling, in order to show percentages of a total.</td>
<td>Slices of a pie chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glyphs</td>
<td>A glyph has a number of visual features each of which varies independently to represent different pieces of information.</td>
<td>Chernoff faces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial positions</td>
<td>Spatial positions are ‘empty’ locations (points or areas) within a visualization that can be tagged and/or linked to each other using either connecting or grouping by boundary.</td>
<td>The areas within a Venn diagram, the connected locations in Minard’s map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbols</td>
<td>All basic visual components to which none of the above descriptions apply, are referred to as symbols.</td>
<td>Dots in a scatter plot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visualizations</td>
<td>Visualizations are composite visual components, composed of any of the visual components in this list.</td>
<td>Any visualization species (e.g. any type of chart)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6 Visual components, listed with descriptions and examples.
6.1 Composite visual components

Complex visualizations may be structured at different levels, with lower-level structures being embedded in higher-level structures (e.g., a time series of maps, drawings of animals embedded in an evolutionary tree, small pie charts on a map, etc.). Thus, visual components may be either basic visual components (most of which are commonly referred to as ‘marks’ in the data visualization community) or they may be composite visual components (last item at the bottom of Figure 6). We refer to a composite visual component as a visualization. Components at any level can be subject to visual encodings. This approach accommodates the analysis of complex embedded structures.

7 Mode of visuo spatial resemblance and mode of semantic correspondence

In addition to the mode of visual encoding, two other representational modes have been more or less retained for the VisDNA framework from the original Diagrammatics – the mode of visuospatial resemblance and the mode of semantic correspondence.

7.1 Mode of visuospatial resemblance

[...] the term schematization is used to denote the process of image reduction which leads to what may be thought of as a synopsis [...] (7/10)

The mode of visuospatial resemblance applies to pictures and maps, covering projection methods, detail-revealing techniques and level of schematization. Projection methods include linear perspective, orthographic views, and cartographic projections. Detail-revealing techniques for showing otherwise occluded or difficult-to-see parts include cut-away views, exploded views, ghosted views and insets showing enlarged details (some of these are discussed in Richards, 2017).

Schematization, also referred to as ‘mode of depiction’ in the original diagrammatics, is “concerned with the degree of fidelity with which the image is rendered, that is, the extent to which it is barren of detail” (10/7). The degree of schematization ranges along a continuum from the mimetic to the schematic, from being visually or spatially realistic and detailed to being visually or spatially edited and synoptic – see Figures 7 and 8. Regarding picturing, the idea of a continuum from the mimetic to the schematic is illustrated by Scott McCloud (1993, p. 45) with a sequence of images running from a ‘realistic’ picture of a face to a very simplified one. In the case of mapping, a detailed relief map of a mountain range is an example of a relatively mimetic map, while a subway map is an example of schematic map.
7.2 Mode of semantic correspondence

 [...] it is proposed that the mode of correspondence may range from the literal, to the non-literal (3/32–33)

Picturing can be characterized by its mode of semantic correspondence, which deals with the type of relationship between ‘what is pictured’ and ‘what is meant’. The mode of semantic correspondence may be literal or non-literal.

- In literal picturing, ‘what is pictured’ – the physical entity (or scene), existing or imagined – is ‘what is meant’.
- In non-literal picturing, ‘what is pictured’ is not ‘what is meant’, but rather represents it through metaphor, metonymy or convention, for example.

This concept of semantic correspondence being literal or non-literal constitutes a further analogy between visualization and language (see section 3).

Figure 8 shows that mode of semantic correspondence and mode of visuospatial resemblance can vary independently from each other. It shows literal and non-literal examples of both mimetic and schematic picturing.

8 Visual treatment

 [...] rhetoric and associated modes of speech can in some cases have a visual counterpart [...] what is represented can be subject to mediation by a process we might well describe as diagrammatic rhetoric. (6/36)

 [...] style can have a great effect on the mood of an illustration, without necessarily influencing the internal relational content. (7/4)
Through **visual treatment** the visual components and the visual configurations in a visualization may be manipulated to suggest additional nuances of meaning, or connotations, beyond what is conveyed by the **visual encodings**. The graphic designer Nigel Holmes has made statistical charts take on the appearance of something related to the topic, adding a further level of meaning. For example, a spiky graph of ‘Monstrous Costs’ is pictured as the teeth of a dragon (Holmes, 1984, p. 45). We may term this a case of ‘graphical rhetoric’.

Related to the idea of graphical rhetoric are inflections in meaning created by the illustrative **style** used to produce a visualization – giving it a ‘mood’ or ‘tone of voice’, e.g., ‘whispering’ versus ‘shouting’ its message. Within style we may also include the use of **decoration** and **backgrounds**. Clive Ashwin (1979) discusses style in illustration, offering a framework for its analysis.

**9 Supporting visualization design with the VisDNA framework**

*I rejected the notion of working with a taxonomy of diagram types, which could be potentially restricting [...] (10/19)*

Whilst such classifications may be useful for other purposes, I am uncertain of the value of these schemes to designers of diagrams.
In working with a taxonomy of diagram types there may be a tendency to design within common families and to overlook the possibilities of hybrid forms. (10/9)

It is further proposed that [...] this investigation can be used by designers as a basis for generating alternative diagrammatic structures. (0/9)

 [...] one means of generating a series of alternative [...] diagram[s] could be to use the modes [...] as a check list of what may be regarded as conceptual building bricks. (10/19)

All of the above, from 1984, still holds for our current VisDNA framework. The framework provides a tool for the analysis and specification of a comprehensive range of different types of visualizations in terms of specific combinations of VisDNA building blocks.

Figure 9 details which visual encodings may be used to represent which types of information. For opening up further visual encoding options, information of one type may be transformed into another type – Figure 10 lists possible transformations. When creating a visualization, one may follow the process laid out in Figure 11. Through this process the VisDNA framework offers a means of exploring a wide range of available options for visual encoding and composition. It may even support the generation of entirely novel visualization species.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>information type</th>
<th>question</th>
<th>visual encodings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>configuration and visual appearance</td>
<td>What does it look like?</td>
<td>arranging: picturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spatial location</td>
<td>Where?</td>
<td>arranging: mapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>point in time</td>
<td>When?</td>
<td>arranging: positioning along a coordinate axis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quantity</td>
<td>How much or how many?</td>
<td>arranging: positioning along a coordinate axis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>varying: sizing, repeating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proportion</td>
<td>What proportion?</td>
<td>arranging: proportional space-filling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>order</td>
<td>Which order or ranking?</td>
<td>arranging: ordering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>varying: sizing, repeating, gradient coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>category</td>
<td>Which group or category?</td>
<td>arranging: grouping by position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>linking: grouping by boundary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>varying: colour coding, shape coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>presence of a given relationship</td>
<td>Does a given relationship</td>
<td>arranging: coupling by adjacency, nesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(between two entities)</td>
<td>hold? (between two entities)</td>
<td>linking: connecting, grouping by boundary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because of its flexible structure, further VisDNA building blocks may be added to the framework to accommodate any additional visualization species that one may want to describe and that cannot be fully specified using the current scheme. Examples may be the addition of VisDNA building blocks for animation or interactivity in visualizations.

### 10 Auditing visualizations

A process of **auditing** diagrams is proposed which is aimed at isolating the fundamental modes of graphic organization available for certain classes of diagram. (0/8)

The *Diagrammatics* of 1984 introduced a method of analyzing diagrams, a process referred to as ‘auditing’. We have taken this concept forward and devised a new method of analyzing visualizations using VisDNA. This approach uses ‘specification trees’ – an example is shown in Figure 12, which describes the diagram shown in Figure 5 (this diagram was analyzed in the original *Diagrammatics*, 9/13–9/19). VisDNA specification trees are constructed using rigorous rules of composition, and aligned with every specification tree is an equivalent description in an English language sentence – which may help when discussing visualization options.
The complete set of VisDNA grammar rules for creating specification trees is given in Richards and Engelhardt (forthcoming) – together with descriptions of layout principles and directions (only touched on here). Also see the VisDNA.com website.

The VisDNA building blocks and the way in which they can be combined, as exemplified by the specification trees, may offer the basis for a process of formalization and the potential for machine readable specifications. This may serve as a basis for a software system that provides computer generated visualization advice, which could be linked to a rendering engine in order to produce actual visualizations and variants of them.

11 Conclusions

Much of the original theoretical basis of Diagrammatics, propounded in 1984, with its “grammatically-based analysis” (10/3) still holds good today, and has provided much of the foundation on which our newer
The chart of Miyano machine tools is a visualization that is composed of visualizations (of machines) that are arranged using vertical positioning on a coordinate axis [showing time] and that are varied through colour coding [showing categories] and that are tagged with textual components [showing identifiers] and that are linked using connecting [showing relationships] with directed connector lines (vertical bands) that are tagged with textual components [showing categories], and that are composed of pictorial components (machine parts) that are arranged using picturing [showing configuration and appearance].

Figure 12 The VisDNA specification tree for the chart of Miyano machine tools (also shown in disaggregated form in figure 5). More example specification trees can be found in Richards and Engelhardt (forthcoming) and at VisDNA.com.
VisDNA framework has been constructed. That earlier work has been extended by adding to its grammatical analogy the biological metaphor of DNA. This has introduced the scheme of colour-coded building blocks with three-letter codes, and the rules for their combination in representing various visualization species.

One of the goals of Diagrammatics was “to provide a more precise scheme of terminology than is customarily used by designers and design teachers [... and] those engaged in research into various issues related to communication through diagrams” (1/7). This has been addressed through the VisDNA vocabulary.

The work introduced here offers the designer a means to explore visualization options, as opposed to “working with a taxonomy of diagram types, which could be potentially restricting” (10/19). The DNA of visualization (VisDNA) goes beyond the 1984 work. With its precisely defined building blocks and rigorous grammatical combinations rules, the VisDNA framework provides a system for undertaking a range of analytical activities, both in visualization design practice and in related visualization research.

References


diagrammatics.com


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