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Extra Credit – Map Critique

In this and other related classes, we’ve covered several examples of bad maps. I am a fan of this approach, providing poor map design counterexamples to the usual depictions of ideal maps provides better insight as to actual synthetization of good maps vs just parroting the positive examples. However, even after taking several classes, I’ve noticed somewhat of a misstep. We keep covering maps that work poorly based on an overfocus on data; whether that is from overfocusing on data representation vs any kind of visual appeal, or just plain lack of care, these maps are visually bad but at least functional. What I feel is not as much represented is the other alternative: maps so focused on creating an engaging picture that they discard any regard for data comprehension. Thus, the map that I’ve chosen to critique is the most flagrant example of this that I could find.

The map, a “spiral” choropleth cartogram, is likely technically sound. The source is verifiable and legitimate, the scaling of each country’s size is likely correct, and the color wheel seems to be a good fit for what is trying to be shown here. Unfortunately, that’s about where the positive aspects end. Besides the obvious failure of the 3 three second test, all that comes up are questions, which we will cover. To condense, as someone in class said, “It’s usually a bad sign if there needs to be instructions on how to read your map.”

To start at likely the most confusing part, we can look at the spiral. With it being a map and the “field” being round, one could reasonably expect this to be an approximation of the globe, something that I didn’t even notice was false until after the initial three second test. Entirely contradictory to any sort of intuitive interpretation, the map spirals inwards based on the GDP/debt ratio. It doesn’t even start the spiral at the top left to catch a line-of-sight. Even getting past the odd choices in *placement*, things are rendered further unclear by the *arrangement*. The size distortion is already a comprehension barrier in some cartograms, but tilting/rotating the countries to fit the spiral only worsens the issue. The color-graded spiral does not provide enough visual structure to make up for the lack of a regular, at least somewhat true-to-Earth layout. All in all, the spiral as a concept has unbalanced many important rules of recognizability, for both the cartogram format and in general.

Another issue I have is with that color-grading. Specifically, the color imbalance as to amounts of the two main hues. Even taking into account the larger ring and smaller sizes of countries, there is substantially more red than green. This can be attributed to the flawed classification. I’m already torn on whether or not this should just be a continuous ramp with how indistinct all but the darkest shade of each shade is (ex. All but the darkest red blend together in the spiral format) but the classes are disproportionately towards covering red by a factor of 3. I’d say to either reduce the amount of classes or to just change to a gradual ramp.

However, as it is flawed to a conceptual level, the most it can serve as is a rare example of what happens when artistry is valued over function in a map.