← BACK TO BLOG

If I were new to Tableau again: 3 things no one told me

GUEST AUTHOR
JULY 6, 2016

Note: The following is a guest post by Tableau Social Ambassador Bridget Winds Cogley.

Some people write posts about things they'd tell their younger self. I wouldn't have listened, and neither would have they. We know this. How? Because other people DID tell them. And no one listened. Maybe it was your grandma, maybe your mother, maybe some other person (random dude on the corner, old boss, you pick it). It was said before, that I promise you.

But on to the point. I started out with Tableau before my area had a user group. Don't get excited: We were really far behind. Seriously, like our airport, nothing exciting happens in Columbus, or C-bus. BUT, we're C-bus. We have buckeyes. And Cow Town Pizza. And concrete corn. And now the John Glenn Airport in Columbus.

And we walk through fields of (concrete) corn...

So, if I were new to Tableau again, what would I want to hear (again)?

Tableau was created differently

Sometime over 13 years ago, Chris Stolte turned his Ph.D thesis, a small undertaking called the Polaris formalism, into a business with his thesis advisor, Pat Haranhan, and Christian Chabot, a friend who drove around in a Geo Prizm to sell it (very 2003).

Chris Stolte wanted to make understanding data natural, you know, like how the human head works. He took ideas from PowerPivot and made something that liked relational data, not just cubes, and focused on charts.

Full stop here: 13 years ago, cubes were all the rage, as were cell phones from Nokia. You know, the ones with nine buttons on the front and screens smaller than your LinkedIn picture. But someone looked at the Rubik's Cube and wondered what was inside. That's what happened with Tableau and data analysis.

Rather than type out long queries or fight to make information visual, Chris worked to make it accessible. The magic is shown below.

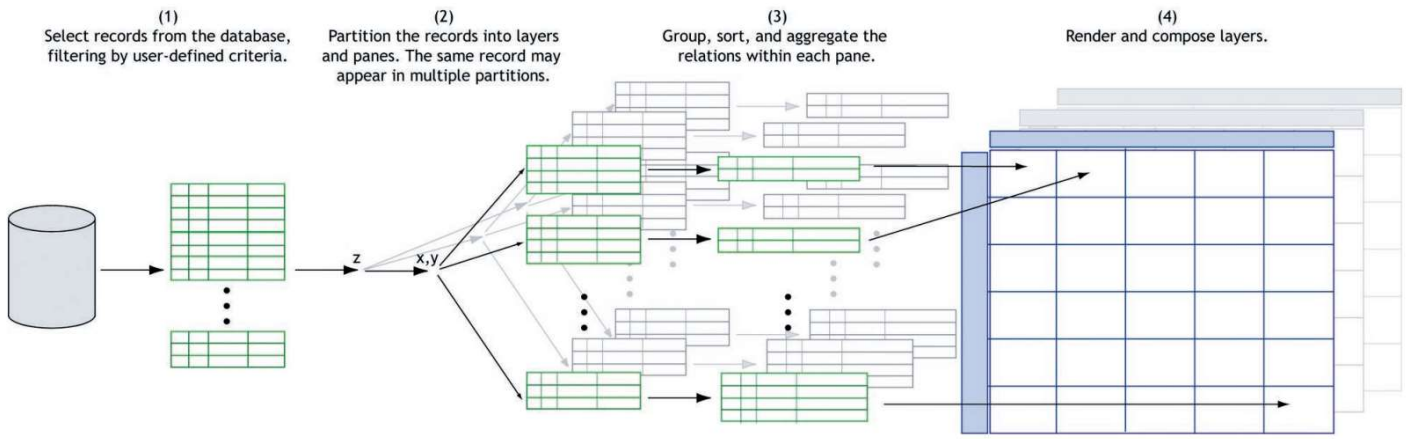
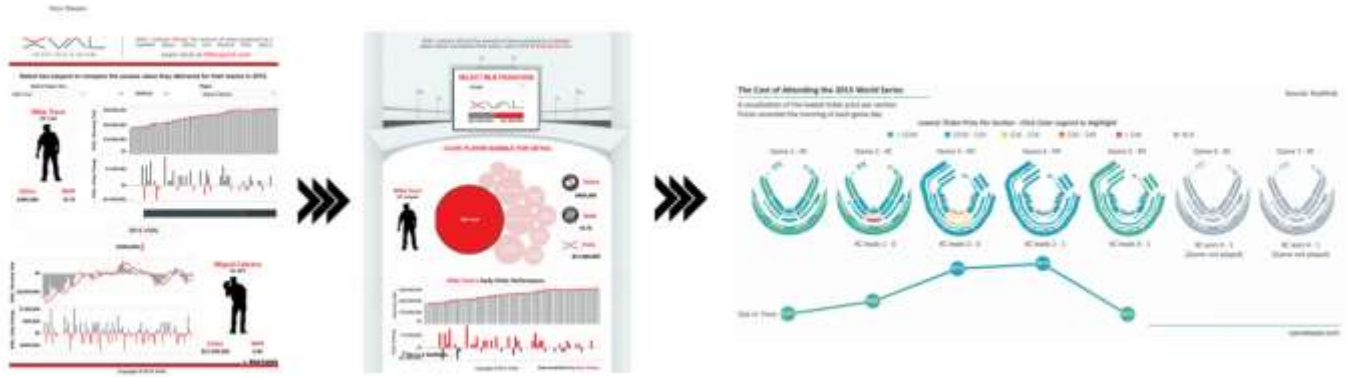


Tableau runs on VizQL. And VizQL is a language—yes, like SQL is a language—that follows a visual syntax. It's powered by dragging and dropping, but it's not just dragging and dropping. No, each item—the Marks card, the rows, the columns—all have grammar, and that grammar translates to the source. As a linguistics nerd, this is mind-blowing to me.

Tableau has evolved differently

Just like other languages, Tableau has evolved. It's called the diachronic process. Some people say it's just a program maturing, like any other software. But look at how visualizations change. Look at how that change evolves over time.

I got permission to pick on former Iron Viz champ Ryan Sleeper this time. Send him kudos for his bravery (and well as props for some stellar vizzes).



If we look, we can see his style progressively evolve (go look at his vizzes to get the full picture). And, of course, he moves toward one of my favorite colors! What's not to love?

Now, this isn't just integration of new features. In fact, there's a lot that's custom and not feature-related. These are things like color, placement, integration of art for fonts, shapes, and the like.

So if this evolution isn't just product related, then what's driving it? It's how we communicate that's changed. It's not just fads in design, but usage and maturation of language. You know, how we tell stories in the first place.

Tableau is dramatically different—as in dramatic pictures

We see from the above that Tableau is a visual tool. As we move from the ideas of tables and rigid constructs that stem from Excel, SQL, or wizards, we get to understand the world in a different light. Bilinguals, you get this already: Sometimes the perfect word for a concept exists, but it's in a different language.

For anyone who can read a character-based language (more politely called logographic systems by language nerds), you have additional insight into the difference that makes. And, my far-and-few-between signers, you get it the most.

Let's take a quick detour here. Paragraph for paragraph or concept for concept, most languages convey information at around the same right rate. Spanish speakers, for example, may use more words (I blame all the articles), but their rate of speech is also generally faster than English speakers, so their rates of concept-to-speed end up about the same.

Guess what: Sign languages and spoken languages also run the same speed, except in one area, describing spaces and places. Harlan Lane tested this and many sign-language users can attest: Spatial descriptions in sign languages go farther, faster.

Tableau is like American Sign Language for data analysis and visualization. It was designed for humans looking to understand information. It takes its queries (you lucky

people at #data16 in London have some explainin' to do) and puts them into a visual form, which then translates back to either Tableau's in-memory storage or the original source. This is game-changing for those of us who have spent years saying, "If I could just..." Guess what? Now you can.

You've read this. You've been told. But two to five years down the road, I expect you to write something similar. Because Michael Cristiani knows I did, and he's the one who tried to tell me this before.

For more tips, tricks, and vizzes by Bridget, check out her Tableau Public page and her blog, TableauFit. You can also connect with her on Twitter @windscogley.

You might also be interested in...

Comments

Submitted by Toby Erkson on July 7, 2016 - 8:37am

As a programmer I'm interested in language as well so I really liked the PDF on sign language. I didn't realize it was not universal (BSL, ASL, etc.).
Reply

Submitted by Ytallo Silva (not verified) on July 12, 2016 - 4:21pm

Great post, nice to know
Reply

Submitted by BettyWatt (not verified) on August 22, 2016 - 10:02pm

This is wonderful article i like it very much there are many things will be provided for this services. i am a writer working at custom essay writing service(http://clazwriters.com/) it will give us the best choice of writing service for your academic life.

Reply

Submitted by giuseppe (not verified) on August 30, 2016 - 8:54am

i love the way you work,, your dedication is really good,, under armour running shoes on sale motivates me to work more

Reply

Submitted by Sanath (not verified) on August 24, 2017 - 7:55pm

Tableau learning

Reply

Submitted by john rankin on August 30, 2017 - 1:51am

What exactly were you trying to tell us.
All I got was C-bus!

Reply

Submitted by irina.villacreces (not verified) on October 24, 2017 - 1:56pm

really good post, thanks for sharing the basics

Reply

Submitted by alexander (not verified) on November 1, 2017 - 2:38pm

Great... except - phones back then did not have 9 buttons. There were 12 on num pad (1-0, 0, * and #) + green/red buttons to call/hang up. And usually a joystick or some sort of arrow keys/accept buttons)

Reply

Submitted by Ben McNally on November 9, 2017 - 4:30am

Perhaps I'm a really bad reader, but I kept waiting for the "3 things no one told me", and then the article ended. What I saw was an essay on the general theme of Tableau and information, but unfortunately the content didn't live up to the promise.

Reply

> Submitted by Marielle Vena on November 14, 2017 - 2:08pm
>
> I think it's the headings, but I have the advantage of not commenting at 4:30 am.
>
> Reply

> Submitted by S BadKat (not verified) on December 19, 2017 - 10:51am
>
> I agree....this reads more like a commercial post for Tableau rather than sharing any real learning insights. So it's different. Ok. Great! Obviously we all are into Tableau otherwise we would not be reading this post. I did not take anyway anything that helps me make better vizualizations from this.
>
> Reply

> > Submitted by john.kelly (not verified) on February 17, 2018 - 5:17pm
> >
> > well, this was an insightful article that allows me to understand the level at which Tableau works. But, then, I have a computer science background. This might not be of interest to "all" users. If you want to know how to make better visualizations, take one of the classes... they look very good.
> >
> > Reply

> Submitted by Joseph Berman (not verified) on February 5, 2018 - 8:02am
>
> I totally agree. The title of this post leads one to believe that this is going to be something more along the lines of "3 mistakes I made that you shouldn't". Instead, it's just a fluff piece with the daring thesis "Tableau has changed over time". Well,

> yeah, I would expect that version 10.5 is different that version 1.0. There's no useful takeaway from this post.
>
> Reply

Submitted by Emily Steeno (not verified) on February 11, 2018 - 7:13am

Great article! I know you wrote it over a year and a half ago but learning how it's different than cube data is very meaningful to me.

Reply

Add new comment

Your name Kristy M.

Comment *

Notify me when new comments are posted

SAVE

Subscribe to our blog