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Interactive 3D Visualisation of Exoplanets

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Abstract

We have large amounts of information about planets outside of our solar system, and this can be accessed by anyone from the Kepler Exoplanets dataset [20]. However this information is often complex not easily understood by laypeople who lack in depth knowledge of stellar objects. This is problematic as it means that the data gathered about these planets is not being used effectively to communicate to the masses. To resolve this a visualisation has been created that can convey this information in a way that interested laypeople can understand. This visualisation can be used as an information source for those wanting to increase their knowledge about the planets residing outside of our solar system. This report outlines the project carried out including the planning of the deliverable visualisation, its implementation, and its evaluation to discover how its effectiveness at fulfilling the requirements driving its creation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Kepler Exoplanet dataset contains information about planets from outside of our solarsystem discovered by the Kepler space observatory, Figure 1.1. The Kepler space observatory was launched in 2009 by NASA to discover Earth like planets orbiting other stars [10].

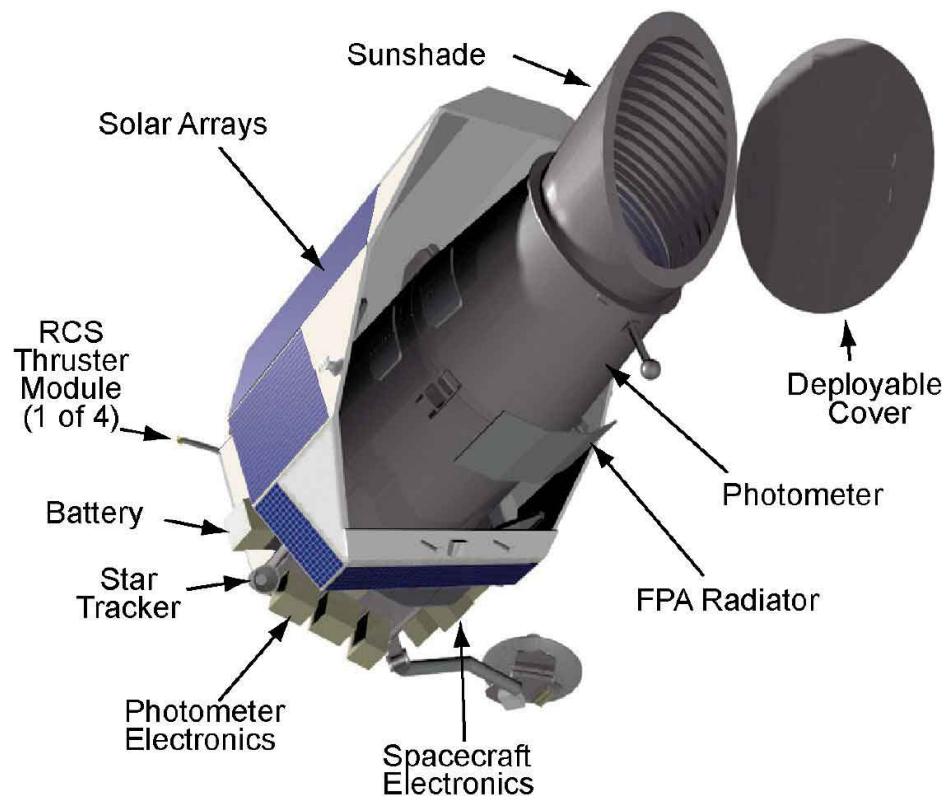


Figure 1.1: The Kepler space observatory

This project seeks to design, implement, and evaluate an interactive 3D visualisation software system for displaying the content in the Kepler Exoplanet dataset using both gestures and traditional interactive methods [20]. This deliverable is intended as a standalone 3D visualisation with two modes of interaction, keyboard and mouse or Microsoft Xbox Kinect sensor [4]. The resulting visualisation will present the information from the dataset in a way that the target users, laypeople who have an interest in astronomy, can understand and interact with.

1.1 Problem statement

There have been many planets located outside of our own solar system, these are called exoplanets, and are referred to interchangeably as planets and exoplanets for the remainder of this report. Information about these exoplanets is stored in the Kepler Exoplanet Dataset [20]. This project seeks to develop and evaluate an interactive 3D visualisation software system for the Kepler Exoplanets Dataset. Visualisations are valuable as they foster immersion and enjoyment, both of which result in improved learning and recall. This means that creating an effective and engaging visualisation will help convey the information in the dataset effectively to the users.

The complex nature of the data involved in this project caused a range of problems revolving around understandability. This project attempts to address these issues in a way that results in increased accessibility of the information contained in the dataset for laypeople. The following subsections outline these in detail.

1.1.1 Understanding the content in the dataset

Understanding and analysing large datasets whose size defies simplistic or trivial analysis by humans is a known issue, and one that many areas of research are attempting to address. These areas of research include from data mining, data analytics, and visualisations in order to discover and highlight important features in the data so that people can more efficiently understand and use it.

Humans often rely on internal visualisation when we solve problems. We create an image in our mind of a situation in order to make sense of it [17] which allows for faster and more comprehensive understanding. The content in the dataset used for this project is made up of records of every one of the 2234 exoplanets discovered by the Kepler Mission. Each of these records contains 46 fields shown in Figure 1.2 which makes it next to impossible for someone to internally visualise as there is so much information, especially as most of it consists of floating point numbers. This means that an external way of visualising the data is needed.

KOI	Dur	Depth	SNR	t0	t0_unc	Period	P_unc	a/R*	a/R*_unc
r/R*	r/R*_unc	b	b_unc	Rp	a	Teq	EB prob	V	FOP
N	P. Zone Class	P. Mass Class	P. Composition Class	P. Atmosphere Class	P. Habitable Class	P. Gravity (EU)	P. Esc Vel (EU)	P. Period (days)	S. Hab Zone Min (AU)
S. Hab Zone Max	P. HZD	P. HZC	P. HZA	P. HZI	P. Int ESI	P. Surf ESI	P. ESI	S. HabCat	P. Habitable
P. Hab Moon	P. Confirmed	P. Disc. Method	P. Disc. Year	S. Name	S. Constellation				

Figure 1.2: Fields of the dataset to be visualised

Therefore this project aims to find a way to display this information visually so that users can better understand it.

1.1.2 Comprehension of planetary information

Much of the information regarding planets is cryptic and unintuitive, this makes it difficult to understand. Data visualisation can therefore be effective because it shifts the balance between perception and cognition to take advantage of the brain's abilities. Seeing (i.e visual perception) which is handled by the visual cortex located in the rear of the brain, is extremely fast and efficient. We see immediately, with little effort. Thinking (i.e. cognition), which is handled primarily by the cerebral cortex in the front of the brain, is much slower and less efficient [13]. Therefore this project will find ways of visually simplifying this data so that it conveys more meaning to users.

1.1.3 Existing solutions lack functionality

Existing data visualisations using this exoplanet dataset lack the ability to display sufficient detail for each exoplanet and do not fully utilise the data available. Existing solutions display only the size, temperature, and orbital information about the exoplanets. While this is useful information that informs users of important facts about the planets, it leaves lots of potential information unseen and overlooked. For example, information about types of planet, solar system information, planet similarities, and habitability. This project will therefore focus on researching, implementing, and evaluating a new interactive visualisation system that displays information contained in the dataset but not included in existing visualisation systems.

1.1.4 Effective user interaction with visualisation

A visualisation that solely displays information without effective methods of interaction limits the immersive qualities that keeps users engaged.

To address this interactive visualisations emerged, generally these visualisations allow users to modify the representation of information rather than the information itself. This means allowing users to control properties of how the data is represented, be it something as simple as the layout of elements or something more complex. Many mediums of interaction are possible from the mundane keyboards, mice, or touchpads to the more esoteric wired gloves, motion sensors, and gesture recognition or even a combination of devices. Existing visualisations surrounding planetary data only allow access to a small subset of the information contained within the Kepler Exoplanet Database. In addition to this most solutions do not allow interaction with any advanced means with the exception of Exo [?] which uses wired gloves to detect the gestures of users. To address this this project incorporates a range of interactive components that allow the user to access large amounts of data. It also introduces a new novel method of interacting with the visualisation via gestures with a Microsoft Kinect sensor.

1.2 Key issues project addresses

To summarise the above sections, this project addresses the following key issues:

- Issue 1. Content in the Kepler Exoplanet Database is difficult to view and understand due to its amount and labeling.
- Issue 2. Planetary information is complex and difficult to comprehend without a visual reference due to its scale.

Issue 3. Existing visualisations for exploring planetary data have minimal functionality for exploring the information in effective ways.

Issue 4. Visualisations need to allow user interaction to make the most of the data they display.

These issues are used in Chapter 3: Requirements Analysis to create the project requirements.

1.3 Contributions of this project

This project provides an interactive 3D visualisation that conveys more information and contains better interactivity than other visualisations in the same area. This extension is evaluated both qualitatively and quantitatively by a within subjects user experiment to ensure that it successfully conveys the information in the Kepler Exoplanet Database. A key part of this project is the development of interactive techniques to provide the best access to the data. These techniques are a mix of keyboard and mouse as well as a novel gesture based approach using a Microsoft Kinect sensor. The work and research completed for this project will provide the opportunity for further improvement of the produced visualisation in the future.

Chapter 2

Project Methodology

2.1 Project management approach

Project management is the discipline of planning, executing, monitoring, and evaluating a project. It is a vital role as it is the glue between all of the components that go into a project. It is beneficial as it encourages critical thinking about requirements, design, and testing before coding is commenced. For this project it helped to avoid the problem of following a code-and-fix approach which is 1) write some code. 2) Fix the problems in the code [9]. The code-and-fix approach may be suitable in some small scale applications, but as soon as a system becomes complex it increases the chance of a system turning into a nightmare of high coupling, low cohesion, no modularity, minimal structure, and little consistency [14]. A widely used method of managing IT projects is to use a Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC), a form of project methodology that details the stages that a project must pass through whilst being completed.

2.1.1 Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC)

The SDLC chosen for this project was a customized Spiral Model [9] made up of requirements analysis, design, implementation, and evaluation stages as shown in Figure 2.1. A software project repeatedly iterates through these stages for each functionality or component produced. The first stage of the spiral involves analysing the requirements of the functionality being created. Following this designs are created and then implemented to produce a deliverable artifact. Finally in the fourth stage the artifact is user tested by one or more people. This evaluation is in addition to the final user evaluation at the completion of the project.

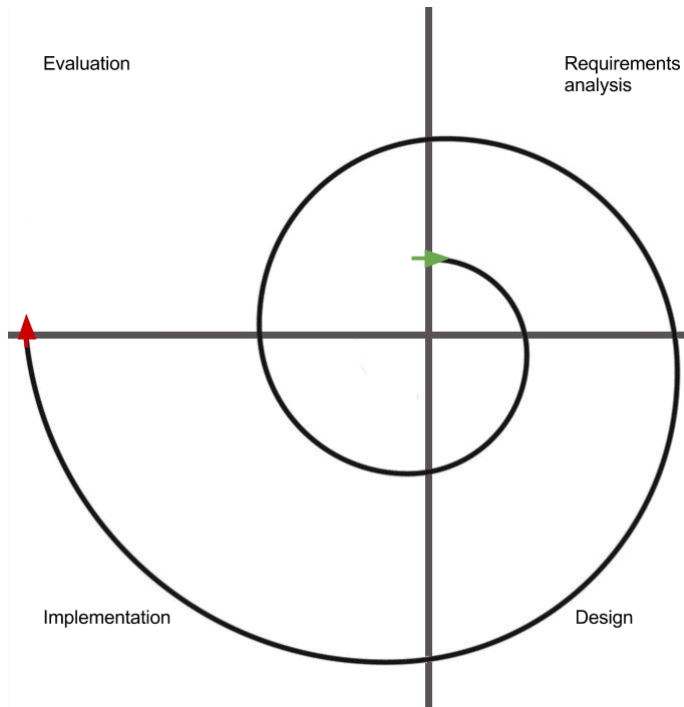


Figure 2.1: Spiral process model followed

This SDLC technique supported the creation of a visualisation as it allowed the flexibility to add and remove components into the visualisation as they were discovered to be beneficial or not. It also supported the expansion of the project brief to include using a Microsoft Kinect sensor in order to interact with the visualisation. The choice of this project management approach meant that whilst I had the freedom to explore visualisation options I also had a structured software development life cycle to guide me and the project through the necessary steps to end in the successful completion of each component. Using a spiral model also allowed me to produce a deliverable feature at the end of each iteration of the model which occurred each week to coincide with a meeting with my supervisor, thus ensured that I did not become delayed or stuck in my development with nothing to show. By using this methodology it also allowed me to prioritize the features that were the most important to the visualisation which reduced the risk that there would be missing or incomplete components at the end of the project.

Following this SDLC allowed me to achieve all of the goals that I set, although it did not always happen within the time frames that I had planned and some deadlines had to be revised. The delays were caused by increasing the scope of the project to include the Microsoft Kinect sensor which required further planning, implementation and testing. Although there were these delays, due to the planning and project management approach that was used, all project elements were completed.

2.2 Other project methodologies explored

Two other project methodologies were explored before the choice to use the Spiral Model was chosen. These alternatives were a loose agile method SCRUM, and a strict Structured Method, the Waterfall Model. The advantages of the Spiral model over these alternatives was that it provided me with the benefits of a structured work flow that is a feature of the waterfall model as well as a flexible iterative process that is a feature of Agile methodologies

without needing to adhere only to the strict guidelines of either. Following a pure waterfall methodology would not have allowed me to iteratively design, develop, and evaluate each feature and would have forced more upfront design which limits flexibility and support for changing requirements as was needed for this project. Following a pure agile approach would not have been optimal either as most Agile methodologies (ie SCRUM [18]) are more beneficial to projects with more than a single person working on them. As it was I was agile in my approach to the project as embraced changing requirements, collaborated with my supervisor (the customer) regularly, emphasized working software over large amounts of documentation [7].

2.3 Supporting Tools for project

By supporting this project methodology with other project management tools such as Gantt charts [APPENDIX] and work breakdown structures (WBS) [APPENDIX], it encouraged efficient documentation of planning and work completed in the project as well as displaying the upcoming stages required to complete the project.

Version control was important for this project as it mitigated against the risks of file system crashes and corruption, it also maintained effective revision history that could be used to backtrack to or view changes that were made earlier in the project. Version control was also valuable as it allowed me to maintain multiple branches (versions) of my project that I could swap between. This was important for the creation of the Keyboard and mouse system and the Microsoft Kinect system as they were on separate branches in a repository.

The version control tool that was used for this project was Git which allowed for the repository to be hosted on the repository hosting web service Github. This version control option was chosen due to the ease of use of as well as my prior experience with Git which has all been positive. There was a minor limitation of this choice as I used a free Github license which meant that the repository would be open to the public.

Weekly meetings with the supervisor of the project, Dr Stuart Marshall, were used to provide guidance and ideas for innovation of the visualisation throughout the project. These meetings ensured that vital components and deliverables were implemented in the required timeframe and also provided a sounding board for ideas for elements to be included in the visualization. Another important aspect of having an involved supervisor was that he provided me the guidance of an experienced academic which was indispensable when navigating the administrative side of organizing delicate matters such as ethics approval for human evaluation of the visualisation.

Chapter 3

Requirements Analysis

To guide the creation of the visualisation a user oriented design approach was used [11], in particular making use of user models (personas). These personas were created to give a sense of empathy and understanding for the foreseen users of the visualisation in order to better understand the requirements and design decisions to be made.

The design of the visualisation was based heavily on User Centered Design as it provided a method of user interface design as well as visualisation design. User Centered Design is a process in which the needs, wants, and limitations of the end users of a system are given extensive attention. To achieve this, personas were created (also known as archetypal users), which are a personification the needs of a larger group of related users. These personas act as stand-ins for real users, describing them in terms of their goals and personal characteristics, and although they are fictitious, they are based on knowledge of real users. This design methodology supported my understanding of how users were likely to use the visualisation.

An additional tool used during requirements analysis was User Scenarios which describe the foreseeable interactions of the user personas with the visualisation. A scenario is made up of a functional goal for the visualisation and describes how it is carried out by a persona. Both of these tools force you to think about the tasks needed for the visualisation and their context in the system as a whole. Once the personas and scenarios have been completed you can then start to design specific elements of the user interface and visualisation based on the requirements and interactions described in the scenarios. The User Models and User Scenarios for this project are described in the following sections.

3.1 User models

Below are the two personas that were used in the design of the visualisation for this project. They depict users that would use the visualisation in the context of a terminal or display in an observatory environment. These personas can be validated during evaluation of the visualization by finding real users that match the core values of the personas. Although this visualisation would be suited towards teaching children about stellar information they were not focussed on during its planning. This was because due to the increased ethical complexity with carrying out an evaluation with children. This could be done in the future once the visualisation is deemed successful.

3.1.1 John Truman (Primary Persona - The interested layperson)

24 year old John is interested in planets and space and has a basic knowledge about both. He frequently visits attractions catering to this interest at locations such as planetariums and observatories. Some of his favourite things to do when visiting these attractions is to go to the computer terminals that allow users to choose what information they see.

John is used to playing computer games and using visualisations and is not overwhelmed understanding and using new systems. He finds that he learns better when provided with visual examples than when reading or listening to information. John is most comfortable using keyboard and mouse when interacting with a computer.

Scenario 1: View planets ordered by their similarity to Earth

When John first sees the system the first thing he notices is that there are many planets orbiting what looks like a star. He doesn't have any point of reference for these planets so their sizes, colours, and movement speeds are meaningless. By providing a way of comparing the planets to Earth it gives a point of reference which is well documented and known by most.

Procedure:

1. John selects that he wants to view the exoplanets compared by their similarity to earth.
2. The planets on screen move so that they are placed in a way that John can compare them to Earth.
3. From here John can select any of the planets for further analysis.

Scenario 2: Select ranges for attributes of each planet displayed

John has become comfortable with selecting the planets and has some idea of the scale and basic attributes of the planets. Now he wants to select more planets to find out more information. However due to the large number of planets he finds it difficult to accurately select them due to overlapping and fast moving small planets.

Procedure:

1. John uses a range of filters to remove planets from his view that don't match the criteria he chooses (temp ,size ,KOI , ESI).
2. As planets disappear the graph of planets expands into the space that frees up, this causes more space to appear between planets making them more selectable.

Scenario 3: Select planets to display more information

John wants to see more information about each of the planets he can see orbiting in the visualisation. To do this he wants to be able to select the planets and have textual information appear on screen.

Procedure:

1. John has the option to pause the rotation of planets in order to make more accurate selections.
2. John clicks on a planet orbiting a planet.
3. The planet selected becomes larger and its outline grows, making it more visible.
4. The text window has all of the information about the planet selected added to it.

Scenario 4: View planets in the same solar system

John is curious about which of the planets he can see in the visualisation are in the same Solar System. To discover this he wants that when a planet is selected all other planets in the same Solar System as the selected planet to become highlighted.

Procedure:

1. When John selects a planet, all planets in the same Solar System become more visible.
2. A label appears on these planets indicating that they are related planets.

Scenario 5: View the Goldilocks zones of each exoplanets star

Looking at the planets orbiting the sun in the visualisation John wonders whether any of them could support life. To see this John wants to see which planets are in the habitable zones of their stars.

Procedure:

1. John selects that he wants to view the exoplanets compared to their stars habitable zones.
2. The habitable zones of the selected planets star become visible.
3. When a planet from a different star system is clicked then the habitable zones will change to match the new selected planets stars habitable zones.

Scenario 6: Select two planets to compare against one another

When John is selecting planets to view more information he often finds that he wants to compare his selections against another planet. To do this John wants to be able to make multiple selections to compare two planets against one another.

Procedure:

1. John selects a planet and chooses to compare it against another planet.
2. Information about this second planet appears so that John can make comparisons.

3.1.2 Cara Thompson (Secondary Persona - Likes gesture based systems)

23 year old Cara likes using interactive visualisations when visiting attractions, she finds that they are more entertaining and provide a better level of interaction and more of a novelty experience with a visualisation than simply a keyboard and mouse.

Both of these users are similar in their need for information from the visualisation but differ in the methods that they wish to access the information and interact with the visualisation. John wants to interact with keyboard and mouse as it is more straight forward and accurate. Cara wants to interact with gestures as she finds it more of a novelty and more immersive.

Scenario 3: Select planets to display more information

Cara wants to see more information about each of the planets she can see orbiting in the visualisation. To do this she wants to be able to hover her hand over a planet to get the information to display on screen.

Procedure:

1. Cara hovers her hand over a planet to make a selection
2. The planet selected becomes larger and its outline grows, making it more visible.
3. The text window has all of the information about the planet selected added to it.

Scenario 4: View planets in the same solar system

Cara is curious about which of the planets she can see in the visualisation are in the same Solar System. To discover this she wants that when a planet is selected all other planets in the same Solar System as the selected planet to become highlighted.

Procedure:

1. When John selects a planet, all planets in the same Solar System become more visible.
2. A label appears on these planets indicating that they are related planets.

Scenario 7: Navigate the visualisation with gestures

Cara doesn't find using keyboard and mouse interesting enough for interacting with the visualisation. She would rather navigate around the visualisation by using hand gestures as it's more immersive.

Procedure:

1. By moving her hand the visualisation pans in the corresponding direction, ie if the hand goes to the top of the screen the visualisation pans up.
2. By moving her hand backwards and forwards the visualisation will zoom in and out.

3.2 Requirements summary

3.2.1 Functional Requirements

Functional requirements define the functions of a system and are derived from the scenarios described above. These functions are described as a set of inputs, the behavior, and outputs from the system. The functional requirements for this visualisation are as follows:

- R1. The visualisation needs to display planetary information to convey knowledge to users.
- R2. The visualisation needs to allow exoplanets to be compared against one another.
- R3. The planets need to be able to be ordered by their similarity to earth (ESI) and by their Kepler Object of Interest number (KOI).
- R4. The visualisation needs to allow users to define ranges of planetary attributes to filter which planets are displayed.
- R5. Users need to be able to view the habitable zones of stars in relation to the planets orbiting them.

3.2.2 Nonfunctional Requirements

Functional requirements are supported by non functional requirements. Non functional requirements impose constraints on the design or implementation (such as performance, security, or usability) of a system.

The non functional requirements for this visualisation are as follows:

- R6. All interaction methods must be visible and intuitive.
- R7. The visualisation must remain uncluttered to reduce information overload.
- R8. There needs to be two modes of interaction with the system, keyboard and mouse vs gesture based.



















Key:	Functional Requirements			
	Nonfunctional Requirements			
	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3	Issue 4
Req 1				
Req 2				
Req 3				
Req 4				
Req 5				
Req 6				
Req 7				
Req 8				

Figure 3.1: Matrix of project requirements to issues project is attempting to address

Chapter 4

Related Work

This section discusses 4 existing visualisations that have a theme depicting space or planets. Following the description, each visualisation is analysed to discover which of the User Scenarios detailed previously existed within the system.

4.1 Worlds: The Kepler Planet Candidates - Non Interactive

This animation [16] shows planet candidates found by NASA's Kepler mission. These candidates are animated in orbit around a single star. They are drawn to scale with accurate radii, orbital periods, and orbital distances. They range in size from 1/3 to 84 times the radius of Earth. Colors represent an estimate of temperature with red indicating warmest, and blue indicating coldest candidates.



Figure 4.1: Image of Worlds Visualisation

The layout of this animation is very similarly to the Kepler Visualisation Tool that I am extending. This means that it provides insights into how my visualisation can be improved as Worlds is a much more visually appealing system. By researching how it displays its Exoplanets I can further improve my own visualisation.

Scenario 1. View planets ordered by their similarity to Earth:

Worlds has comprehensive functionality for comparing the different Exoplanets to one another, however it does not offer any functionality regarding comparisons to earth

Scenario 2. Select ranges for attributes of each planet displayed:

Worlds does not offer any functionality for any filtering of Exoplanets, this means that a user can only see all planets at once which can be overwhelming and causes many of the exoplanets to be excluded from the user due to overlapping and clustering. The reason that this is done is to convey how many Exoplanets there are and how their scale differs among each Exoplanet

Scenario 3. Select planets to display more information:

Worlds is non interactive which means that users are not able to request further information about the visualisation elements that they are seeing. This ability to find out more is a key part of the interactive visualization that is needed for this project.

Scenario 4. View planets in the same solar system:

Worlds shows all Exoplanets as if they are orbiting a single star. This allows for each of them to be compared against one another easily. However this does remove the ability for a user to see which planets are together in the same solar system.

4.2 The Kepler Orrery and The Kepler Orrery 2 - Non interactive

The Kepler Orrery [12] illustrates the exoplanet candidates in their own solar systems. The orbit radii are to scale with respect to each other and planet sizes are to scale with respect to each other, but orbits and planet sizes are different scales. The colors are in order of semi-major axis: two-planet systems (242 in all) have a yellow outer planet; 3-planet (85) green, 4-planet (25) light blue, 5-planet (8) dark blue, 6-planet (1, Kepler-11) purple.

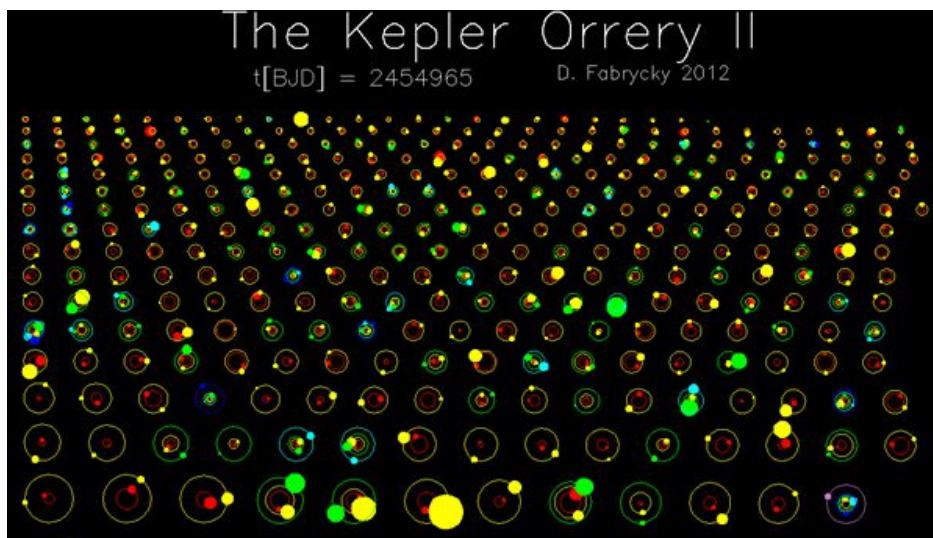


Figure 4.2: Image of The Kepler Orrery Visualisation

This system exhibits small multiples, a grid of small similar graphics or charts, allowing them to be easily compared. This provides insights into how I can use small multiples to display information about groups of planets. This will be important for displaying which planets share a solar system.

Scenario 1. View planets ordered by their similarity to Earth:

Like worlds, The Kepler Orrery shows the similarities between each of the exoplanets but does not have the functionality to allow users to make a comparison to earth and our own solar system.

Scenario 2. Select ranges for attributes of each planet displayed:

As The Kepler Orrery is non interactive it is not possible to change the ranges of the Exoplanets being displayed. However due to the layout of the visualisation, which uses small multiples by grouping each solar system into its own visualisation element it removes a lot of the issue of overcrowding and overlapping.

Scenario 4. View planets in the same solar system:

This visualisation uses small multiples to great effect at displaying the groupings of each panel into each solar system. By displaying each planet orbiting its own star it removes the risk of confusion about what the planet is actually orbiting which could be the case with Worlds.

4.3 Celestia - Interactive

Celestia [1] is a free real-time space simulation that lets you visually experience the universe in three dimensions. It is an open source system written in C++. Celestia does not include any stars that are more than a few thousand light-years from the Sun because the parallaxes of more distant stars are too small to be accurately measured, meaning that it does not contain the distant exoplanets discovered by the Kepler mission.

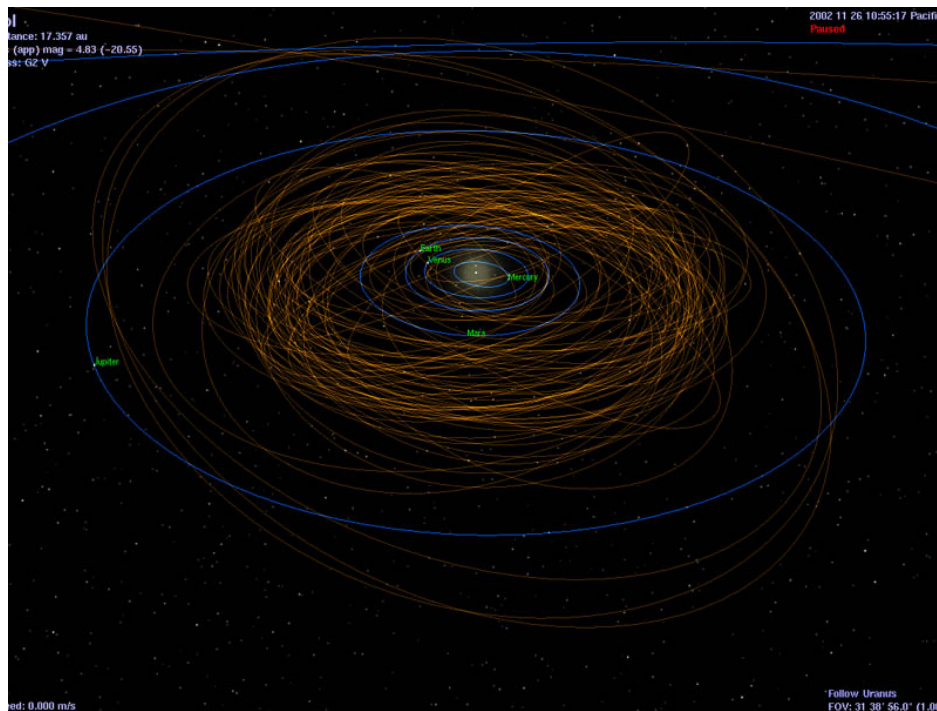


Figure 4.3: Image of Celestia Visualisation

This visualisation is much larger and more encompassing system than is needed for

this project, as it is a full 3D space simulation. However it does offer insights into how to effectively portray planets and their orbits (See Figure 2.3). It also provides textures that can be used in my visualisation to depict what planets actually look like to increase user immersion.

Scenario 3. Select planets to display more information:

Celestia allows users to view a large set of information about each of the planets that it displays. The information it has available to users in toolbars that users can access, examples of this information are radius, phase angle, rotation speed, and temperature.

Scenario 4. View planets in the same solar system:

Celestia allows users to explore a range of solar systems and view the planets that are in them. This is because it is a key feature of the experience that Celestia tries to give users, ie letting them explore the vastness of space.

Scenario 6. Select two planets to compare against one another:

Celestia allows this on a superficial and does not allow detailed information to be compared. Celestia focusses on allowing users to experience the scale of space and planets by exploring in a 3D space. This means that less importance is placed on accessing detailed information.

4.4 Kepler Visualisation Tool

An existing system built with Processing is the Kepler Visualisation Tool [8, 19]. It is a simple visualisation focusing on displaying the candidate Exoplanets temperatures and their locations in relation to their distance from their nearest star, so that a sense of scale can be perceived. Each candidates estimated size, orbital speed, and orbital separation is accurately depicted, and each planet is color-coded according to its estimated effective temperature.

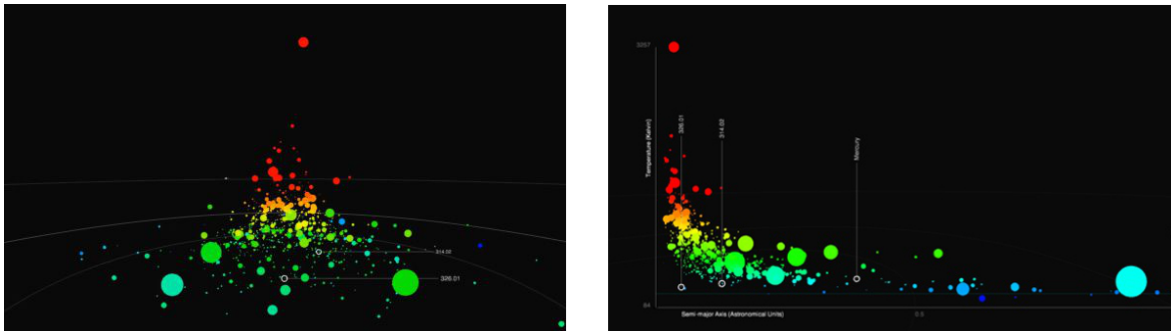


Figure 4.4: Kepler Visualisation Tool Orbital View

The existing work in this system would serve as foundation for this project. Because much of the visual aspects, and initial data manipulation of the existing system are already complete. It means that implementing the features needed for this projects completion could be focused on more heavily and larger improvements to the existing system can be undertaken, such as better labeling and information displays and user interaction methods.

Scenario 1. View planets ordered by their similarity to Earth:

Like Worlds and the Kepler Orrery, The Kepler Visualisation Tool has functionality to display the similarity of each Exoplanet to each other. However, it also has some limited functionality of comparing these to earth which the others lack. It does this by displaying Earth,

Mars, and Jupiter with the same colours, size, and orbit speed as the Exoplanets. This gives a user a chance to comprehend the scale and difference of some of the Exoplanets.

Scenario 2. Select ranges for attributes of each planet displayed:

The Kepler Visualisation Tool allows users to change which attributes the planets are ordered by on the vertical plane (Y axis) ie, by size or temperature, but does not allow users to select ranges of these attributes to filter the Exoplanets

4.5 Summary of Existing Applications

Existing System	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4	Scenario 5	Scenario 6	Scenario 7
Worlds	No	Partial	No	No	No	No	No
The Kepler Orrery	No	Partial	No	Yes	No	No	No
Celestia	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Kepler Visualisation Tool	No	Partial	No	No	No	No	No

Figure 4.5: Matrix of existing solutions mapped to scenarios

Chapter 5

Technology

Many technologies were looked into and experimented with. Then the positives and negatives of each option was weighed up before a decision was made about which would be the suitable choice for the visualisation. It came down to 3 potential technologies that would be suitable for the project, the next 3 subsections outline these in detail.

5.0.1 Processing - Chosen Technology

Processing is an open source programming language and development environment that was initially created to serve as a software sketchbook and to teach the fundamentals of computer programming with a visual context. Using processing would mean that the visualization could be built with Java while still using a successful visualisation framework. The most complete existing visualization using the same exoplanet dataset (Kepler Visualization Tool) is built using Processing. Using this solution would involve learning the Processing language, however Processing is a library built in Java so the syntax is the same. This means the learning curve should be shallow. Using processing means that 3D elements could be included, this wouldn't be possible with D3.

5.0.2 D3 (Data Driven Documents) - Alternate Technology

D3 is a JavaScript library that allows the displaying of data in dynamic graphics. Embedded within an HTML web page, the JavaScript D3.js library uses pre-built JavaScript functions to select elements, create Scalable Vector Graphic (SVG)[17] objects, style them, and add transitions, dynamic effects and tooltips. Large datasets can be easily bound to SVG objects using simple D3 functions to generate rich charts and diagrams. D3 was created because of the need for a balance of expressiveness, efficiency, and accessibility that previous visualization toolkits did not allow [4].

D3 allows the binding of input data to arbitrary input elements. This means that the exoplanet dataset can easily be bound to SVG elements for creating visualizations. D3 adopts the W3C Selectors API to identify document elements queried. This results in a rich but concise selection method of elements in a visualisation. It allows debugging thanks to Google chrome and other modern browsers development tools. A downside to D3 is that it does not allow 3D diagrams, although it does allow pseudo 3D by using the painters algorithm and 3D textures.

5.0.3 Prefuse - Alternate Technology

Prefuse is a set of software tools for creating rich interactive data visualizations [13]. The Prefuse toolkit provides a visualization framework for Java. It supports a set of features for visualizing and interacting with data. It provides optimized data structures for tables, graphs, and trees. It can be used to build standalone applications, visual components embedded in larger applications, and web applets. Prefuse greatly simplifies the process of representing and efficiently handling data, mapping data to visual representations (e.g., through spatial position, size, shape, color, etc), and interacting with the data. To use Prefuse a basic familiarity with the Java is required, including setting up and building Java projects. A knowledge of Swing or another similar user interface toolkit is also useful for understanding some of the concepts behind Prefuse and for integrating Prefuse visualizations into larger applications. Experience with database systems is also helpful. However, Prefuse is a very powerful tool that has a very high learning curve due to the amount of development power that it has. This means that learning it and using it pushes it out of scope for this project.

5.0.4 Decision of technology

The technology chosen needed to offer a combination of high learnability, strong visualisation support, and 3D support. The final technology decision was to use Processing, this is because it had all of the desirable properties that this project required as Figure 5.1 shows.

	D3 (Appendix A.1.2)	Processing (Appendix A.1.1)	Prefuse (Appendix A.1.3)
Potential for 3D	No	Yes	No
Has low learning curve	Yes	Yes	No
Prior evidence of successful visualisations	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interactive	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dynamic transitions	Yes	Yes	Yes
Has existing solution related to planets	No	Yes	No

Figure 5.1: Table of technology choices

By choosing Processing, it allowed me to extend an existing visualisation using the same data set, The Kepler Visualisation Tool [8, 19]. Building upon an existing solution allowed the project to progress faster towards fulfilling the project requirements as less of the groundwork needed to be carried out. This was a large advantage as doing this groundwork would limit the amount of time that could be spent on new features.

Chapter 6

Solution Design: Improved Kepler Visualisation Tool (IKVT)

This section discusses the design of the deliverable visualisation, the Improved Kepler Visualisation Tool (IKVT). It details the key design decisions revolving around structure, aesthetics, and functionality that were made about the visualisation. This project aims to improve an existing visualisation, The Kepler Visualisation Tool which was discussed in the previous chapter. Whilst this existing visualisation displays exoplanets and some of their features, it lacks interactivity for users trying to use it to gain information contained in the Kepler Exoplanet Database effectively. The IKVT expands on this pre-existing visualisation by adding key elements of interactivity missing in the existing visualisation as well as further enhancing the range and amount of data that is available to users about exoplanets. The IKVT also incorporates a novel gesture based interactive mechanism to the visualisation using a Microsoft Kinect Sensor.

6.1 System design and structure

Because this project builds upon an existing system, complete comprehension of how it is designed and how it functions is important. Going ahead in the creation of the visualisation without this knowledge would create opportunities for mistakes and incorrect assumptions about how the visualisation needs to be created. To solve this issue diagrams the Unified Modeling Language(UML) were used. In UML there are two basic categories of diagrams: structure diagrams and behavior diagrams. Every UML diagram belongs to one these two diagram categories. The purpose of structure diagrams is to show the static structure of the system being modeled ie class diagrams, and or object diagrams. Behavioral diagrams, on the other hand, show the dynamic behavior between the objects in the system, including things like their methods, collaborations, and activities ie, use case, and sequence diagrams ?? . For this project sequence diagrams and and class diagrams were used to help understand the exisiting system and plan out the extensions, these are discussed next.

- 1. UML Sequence Diagram** A sequence diagram is a diagram that primarily shows the interactions between objects in the sequential order that those interactions occur. For this project it was used to understand how each of the objects in the system worked together to create the visualisation. Without understanding which objects were responsible for each part of the render cycle would have made it difficult to extend the visualisation. Through the sequence diagram we can see when each of the objects in the system are updated, and when they are rendered.

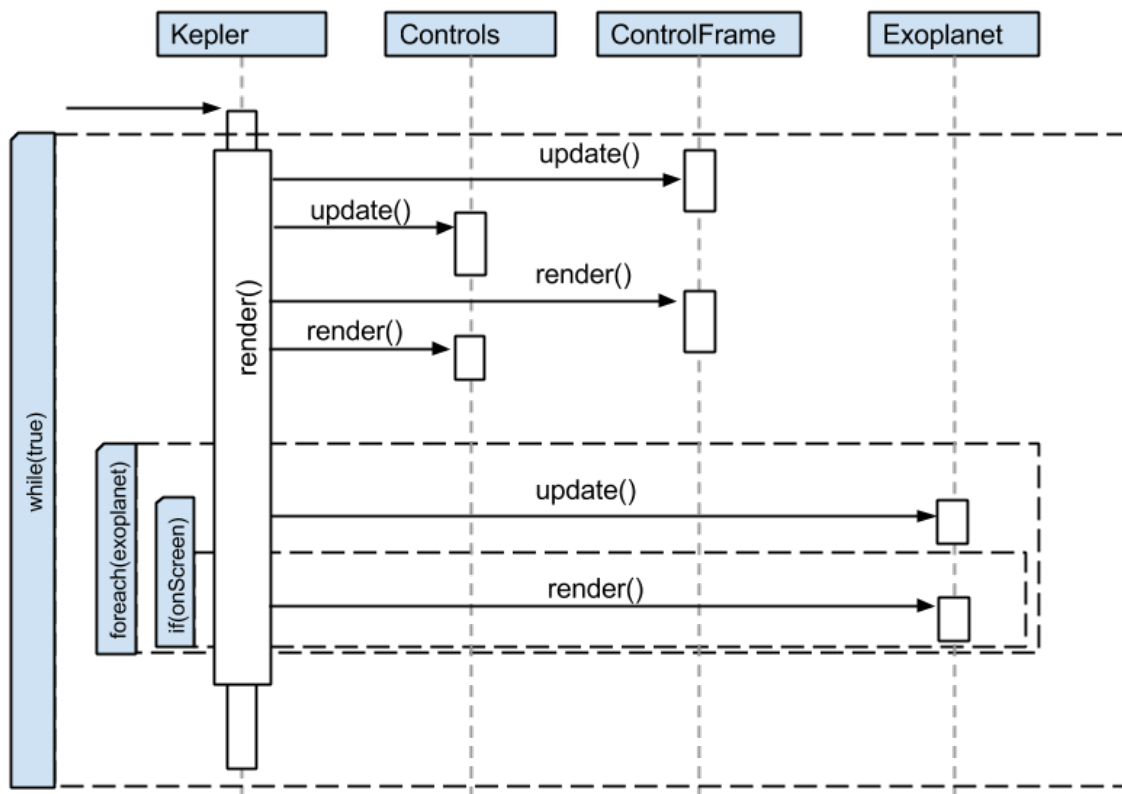


Figure 6.1: Sequence Diagram of IKVT render cycle

2. **UML Class Diagram** Class diagrams describe the structure of a system by showing the system's classes, their attributes, methods, and the relationships among objects. Developers can use class diagrams to design and document the system's coded (or soon the coded) classes. For this project class diagrams were used to understand the makeup of the existing KVT and then to plan the extensions. This class diagram was maintained with the improvements introduced in the the visualisation to provide an overview that could be used for further planning.

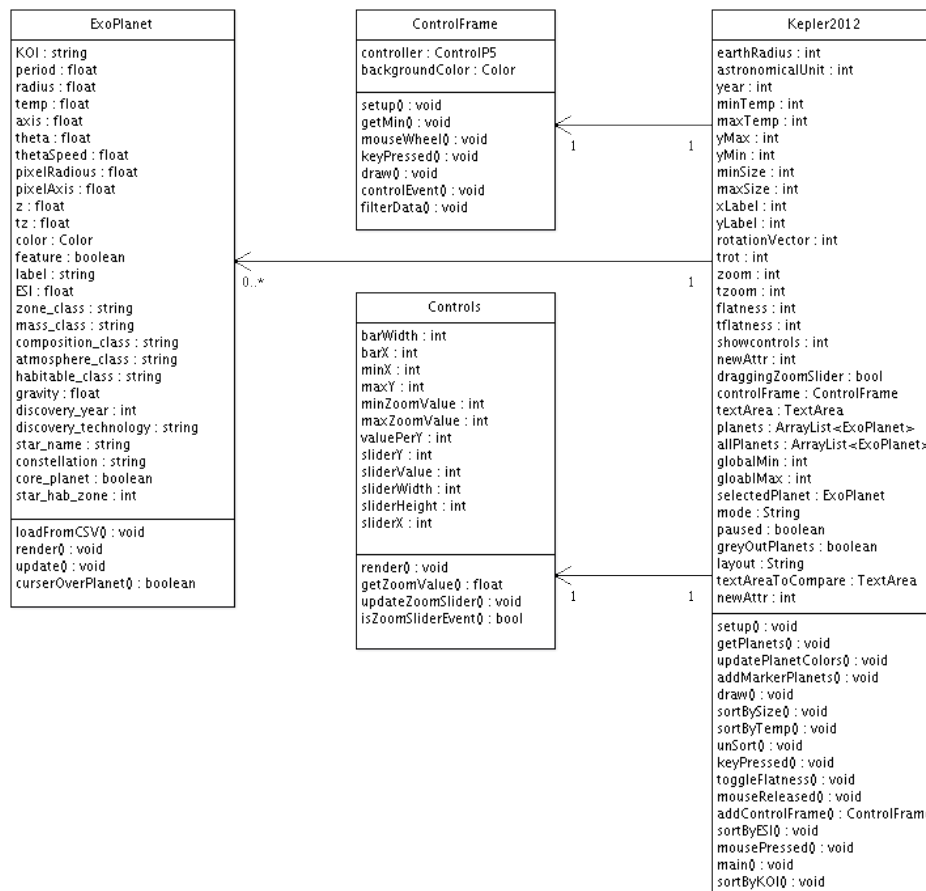


Figure 6.2: Class Diagram of IKVT

By using the sequence diagram in Figure 6.1 coupled with the class diagram in Figure 6.2 you can see where each method and field is located and modified. This is a powerful way of beginning to understand an existing system and then planning extensions.

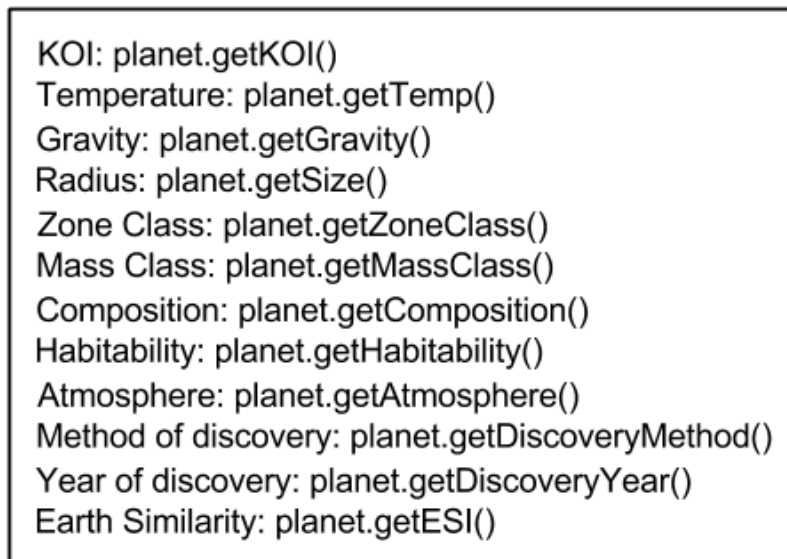
6.2 Visualisation Design

The requirements produced in Chapter 3: Requirements Analysis provide a description of the functionality that needs to be designed for this visualisation. By adding additional details to these requirements we can specify how the visualisation should look, behave, and function.

6.2.1 Functional Requirements

- R1. The visualisation needs to display planetary information to convey knowledge to users.**

This requirement needs some form of textual display in order to convey enough of the information about exoplanets to the user. This can be done with a Java TextArea object to display each of the key attributes of each Exoplanet. The following figure is a mockup of the text area showing the information about each planet that would be displayed and the method calls that would be used.



```
KOI: planet.getKOI()
Temperature: planet.getTemp()
Gravity: planet.getGravity()
Radius: planet.getSize()
Zone Class: planet.getZoneClass()
Mass Class: planet.getMassClass()
Composition: planet.getComposition()
Habitability: planet.getHabitability()
Atmosphere: planet.getAtmosphere()
Method of discovery: planet.getDiscoveryMethod()
Year of discovery: planet.getDiscoveryYear()
Earth Similarity: planet.getESI()
```

Figure 6.3: Mockup of the TextArea

To populate this text area it needs to be possible to select exoplanets, which is discussed in the next requirement.

R2. The visualisation needs to allow exoplanets to be compared against one another.

There are two steps to fulfilling this requirement

1. Allow selection of exoplanets
2. Display additional information about exoplanets when they are selected.

The selection of exoplanets involves detecting when a user clicks and then finding whether any planets are located in that space. This is more complex in this system as it requires detecting if the 3D space of each planet coincides with the 2D location of the mouse click. When a planet is successfully selected it needs to provide feedback and information to the user to inform them that it has been selected and also to provide relevant information.

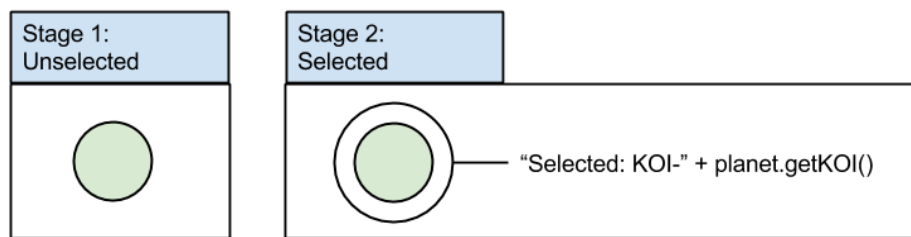


Figure 6.4: Mockup selection process

In addition to this, when a planet has been successfully selected all of the other planets in the same solar system (sister planets) need to become highlighted. This can be done by treating them as if they were selected and providing an additional indication to the user why they were highlighted.

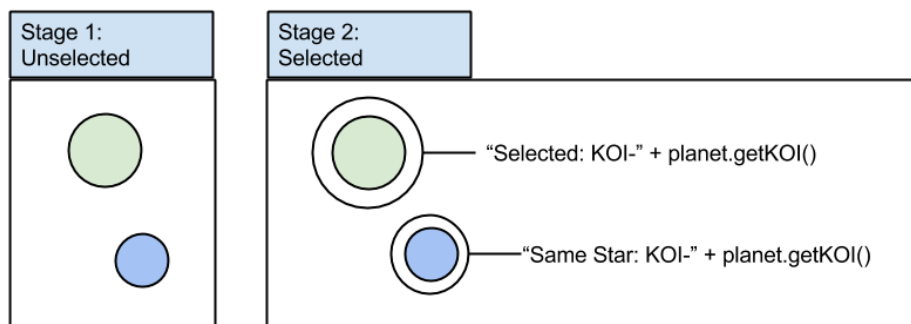


Figure 6.5: Mockup highlight sister planets process

There needs to be an efficient way that users can make comparisons between the detailed textual information about exoplanets. By providing an additional text box and allowing users to select multiple planets this can be accomplished.

Selected Planet	Compared Planet
KOI: planet.getKOI()	KOI: compared.getKOI()
Temperature: planet.getTemp()	Temperature: compared.getTemp()
Gravity: planet.getGravity()	Gravity: compared.getGravity()
Radius: planet.getSize()	Radius: compared.getSize()
Zone Class: planet.getZoneClass()	Zone Class: compared.getZoneClass()
Mass Class: planet.getMassClass()	Mass Class: compared.getMassClass()
Composition: planet.getComposition()	Composition: compared.getComposition()
Habitability: planet.getHabitability()	Habitability: compared.getHabitability()
Atmosphere: planet.getAtmosphere()	Atmosphere: compared.getAtmosphere()
Method of discovery: planet.getDiscoveryMethod()	Method of discovery: compared.getDiscoveryMethod()
Year of discovery: planet.getDiscoveryYear()	Year of discovery: compared.getDiscoveryYear()
Earth Similarity: planet.getESI()	Earth Similarity: compared.getESI()

Figure 6.6: Mockup compare planets text areas

R3. The planets need to be able to be ordered by their similarity to earth (ESI) and by their Kepler Object of Interest number (KOI).

To fulfill this requirement the visualisation needs to allow users to view the exoplanets in a way that uses the Earth as a point of reference and their Earth Similarity Index (ESI) to order them and control their position. Figure 6.7 displays a mockup of how this would be done.

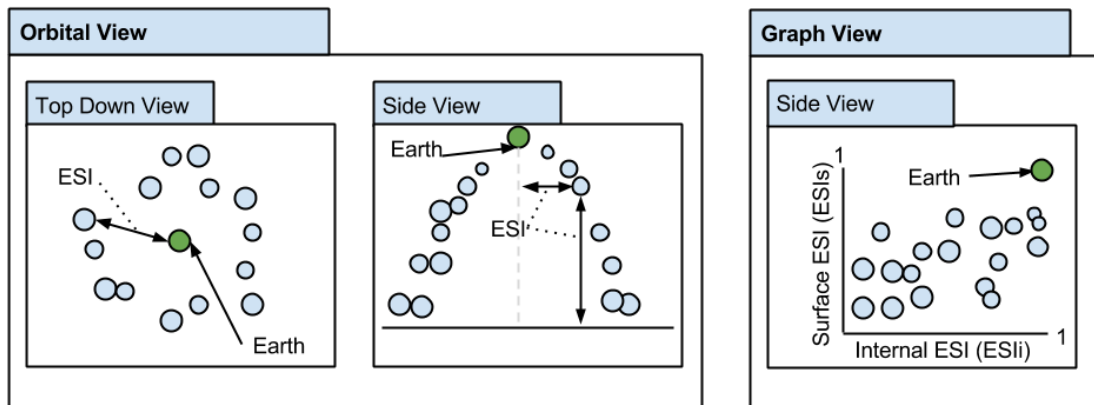


Figure 6.7: Mockup of ESI views

R4. The visualisation needs to allow users to define ranges of planetary attributes to filter which planets are displayed.

To fulfill this requirement a method of filtering exoplanets by their attributes in order to control the number and types of planets displayed to the user. A common method of achieving this is to use a set of sliders that allow a user to filter something by a set of values. For example in this system a slider could be used to control the size of planets that are displayed.

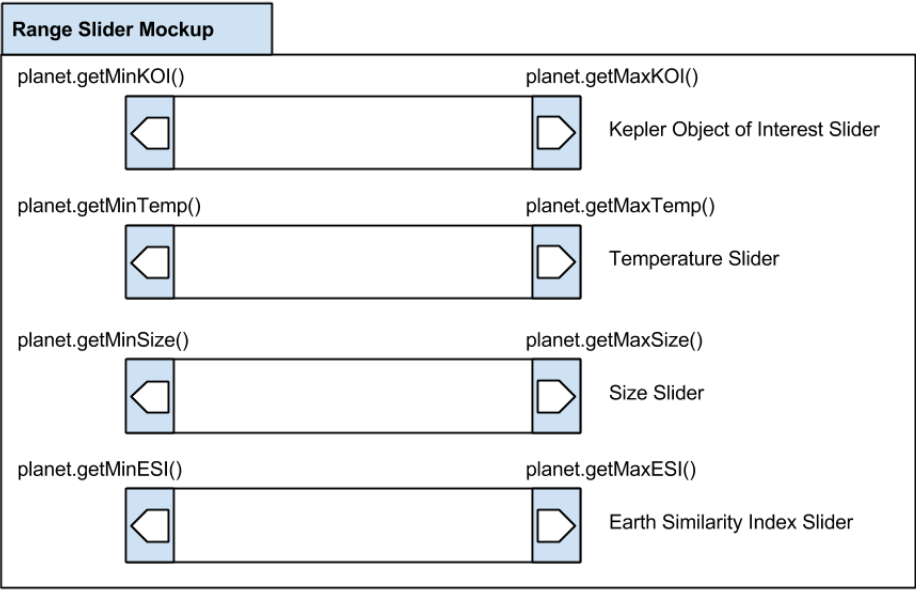


Figure 6.8: Mockup of range sliders

In addition to this users should be able to easily sort the exoplanets to make the most of the filtering. By allowing users to display the exoplanets sorted vertically by the same attribute as the filters, they can easily see how changing the filters affects the exoplanets displayed. This would be achieved by a set of interactive buttons as in Figure ??.

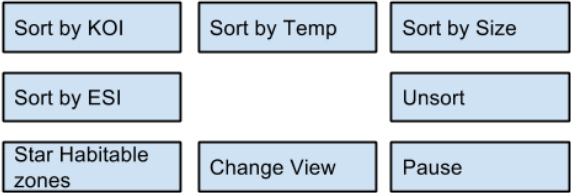


Figure 6.9: Mockup of interactive buttons

R5. Users need to be able to view the habitable zones of stars in relation to the planets orbiting them.

To display the habitable zones of the stars of each exoplanet a way to display the hot (to close to the star), cold (to far from the star), and the habitable zone (in between hot and cold zones) is required. This can be done by showing the selected exoplanet in relation to its star by means of coloured circles depicting where the exoplanet sits inside the zones, as displayed in Figure 6.10.

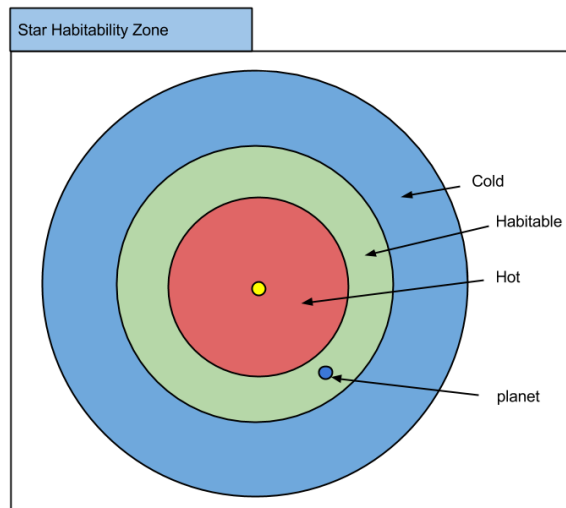


Figure 6.10: Mockup star habitability zone

6.2.2 Nonfunctional Requirement

R6. All interaction methods must be visible and intuitive.

To make an interactive visualisation useable the controlls and interactive methods need to be clear to users. To achieve this for IKVT an interactive panel should be introduced. This panel should contain all of the interactive elements of the visualisation in a single central place that is spacially seperated from the main visualisation. This spacial seperation is imporatatn as it reduces cognitive load on users by allowing them to focus on the visualisation iteslef until they need to use the panel in which case they can focus on that. It also means that users only need to look in one place for all of the interactive elements which reduces the risk of confusion. In this visualisation this interactive panel would contain all of the interactive elements as discussed in the previous requirements as displayed below in Figure 6.11.

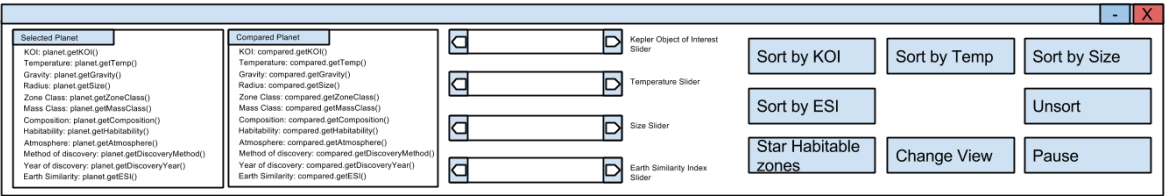


Figure 6.11: Mockup of the interaction panel

R7. The visualisation must remain uncluttered.

The visualisation must not show so much information that it causes information overload for users. The ability to filter and sort the exoplanets gives a user the tools needed to reduce the quantity of planets displayed in the visualisation and thus the information load imposed on users. In addition to this, by having the text area that displays the information about selected planets separate from the main visualisation it reduces the cognitive load on users as they don't have to use this component until they want to.

R8. There needs to be two modes of interaction with the system, keyboard and mouse vs gesture based.

The above requirements mostly relate to the keyboard and mouse system although some of the requirements can carry over to a gesture based system. By incorporating a novel interactive method using a Microsoft Kinect sensor it gives users an alternative method of controlling the visualisation. For this to be successful it means incorporating a means of detecting the gestures of users and linking them to an action in the visualisation. A simple way to do this is to provide an area for the user to gesture to on the screen that controls the movement of the camera in the visualisation as shown in Figure 6.12.

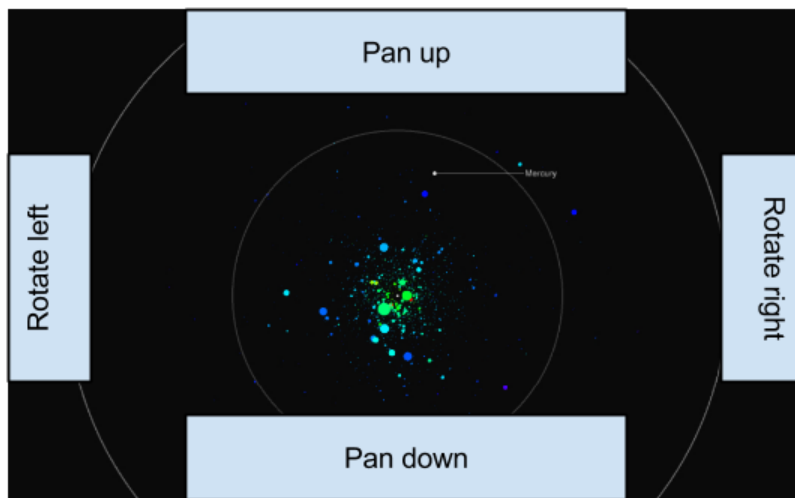


Figure 6.12: Mockup of the Kinect system

In addition to controlling the movement of the camera users need to be able to zoom in and out of the visualisation as well as select exoplanets for further examination as needed for the requirements. To do this a user should be able to push and pull his/her hand from the screen to zoom in and out, as well as gesturing to a planet to make a selection.

As the Kinect sensor no longer requires the use of a mouse the visualisation design needs to be modified to accommodate the use of gestures. This meant incorporating new cursors to indicate the state of the visualisation. There are 7 states that the cursor needs to be able to be in to inform the user of what action they are performing. These states are

- (a) default cursor, hand is at rest or hovering over a planet
- (b) panning up, hand is raised
- (c) panning down, hand is lowered
- (d) rotating left, hand is to the left
- (e) rotating right, hand is to the right
- (f) zooming in, hand is pressed forward
- (g) zooming out, hand is pulled backwards

Having a range of icons that clearly display these states is vital for keeping the user informed of what they are doing. The proposed icons for this are displayed below in Figure 6.13

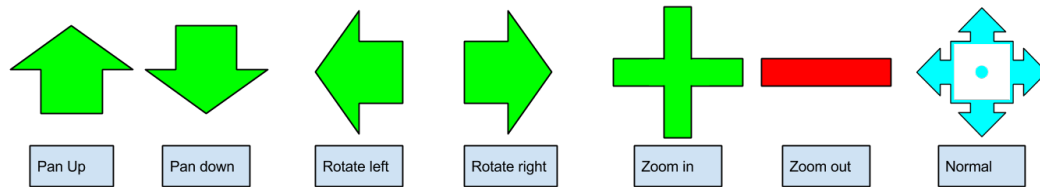


Figure 6.13: Mockup of cursor images for Kinect system

No gesture design has been included for interacting with the interaction panel. This is because the Microsoft Kinect sensor implementation in this visualisation is intended as a proof of concept that interaction via gestures can allow users to access the information within the system. If the user study discussed in Chapter 8: Visualisation Evaluation shows that gesture interaction is successful in this regard then incorporating it further can be undertaken.

These solution designs were used for the implementation of IKVT which is discussed in the next chapter, Chapter 7.

Chapter 7

Visualisation implementation of the Improved Kepler Visualisation Tool (IKVT)

This chapter discusses the implementation of the visualisation using the designs discussed in the previous chapter to fulfill the requirements for this project. It details the tools used, the deliverable features produced, and the problems encountered.

7.1 Tools and artifacts used

7.1.1 Dataset used

The dataset for this project is a comma separated values file (CSV) that contains all of the data pertaining to the Exoplanets. At runtime this dataset is read into the system and an Exoplanet object is created for each element and contains all of the information from the dataset record.

7.1.2 Integrated Development Environment (IDE)

The IDE used for this project is one that is provided with Processing. This IDE provided all of the tools and functionality that were required to effectively implement the solution for this project. Another option that could have been taken was to use Eclipse with the processing package and external libraries imported. However I found that the processing IDE was entirely suitable for the majority of my needs creating the visualisation. The key things that I did not have access to with this choice was the Eclipse Debugger and JUnit tests.

7.1.3 Keyboard and Mouse System

In addition to Processing in the main system there was an additional opensource library required for effective user interface components, this library was called ControlP5 [2]. This library is a customisable and intuitive interactive user interface. It allows for easy creation of visually appealing and precisely layed out interactive GUI components.

7.1.4 Microsoft Kinect sensor system

For the version of the IKVT system that uses the Kinect sensor for user interaction two additional libraries were required to integrate the hardware with Processing, these were:

1. NITE [5]
2. SimpleOpenNi [6]

These libraries provided drivers to run the Kinect sensor in Processing as well as basic gesture recognition and body tracking. However as the libraries were opensource due to the official Microsoft Kinect SDK not being compatible with Processing, the gesture recognition was not as user friendly or effective as the official libraries. The effect of this was that the gesture tracking used in the system had to be created sup-optimally from the opensource libraries.

7.2 Implementation of IKVT

IKVT displays all 2234 exoplanets in the Kepler exoplanets dataset [20]. Each of these exoplanets are represented as coloured ellipses, of which the colour and size are representative of the exoplanets temperature and size respectively. IKVT displays all of these exoplanets as if they are orbiting a single star which in reality would result in planetary collisions but in the visualisation provides users with a way to effectively make observations and comparisons about each of the exoplanets in a single view.

There are two panels that make up the visualisation, the visualisation panel, and the control panel. The visualisation panel is where all of the exoplanets are displayed as well as text boxes describing the state of the visualisation to keep the user informed. The control panel contains all of the interactive components that the user can use to change the state of the visualisation. The components it contains are; two text areas that can be used interchangeably to display information about selected planets, four range sliders (Figure: 7.1) that are used to filter the exoplanets as discussed previously, and eight buttons to toggle the state of the visualisations. These buttons are "Sort by KOI", "Sort by Temp", "Sort by Size", "Sort by ESI", "Change View", "Suns Habitable Zone", "Pause", and "Unsort" as shown in Figure: 7.2.

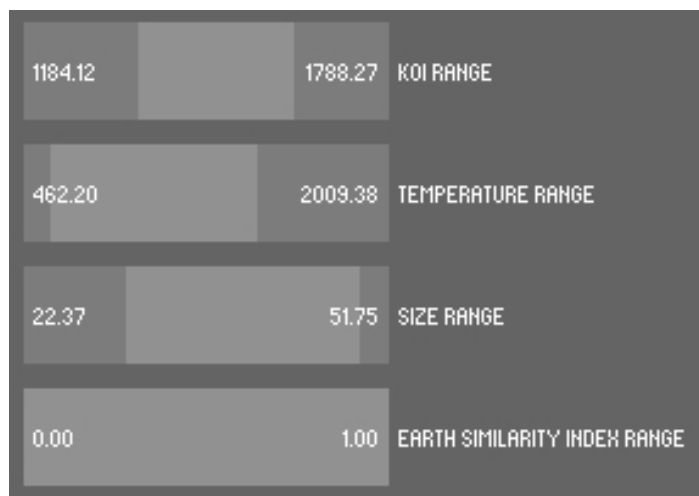


Figure 7.1: Panel of interactive range sliders

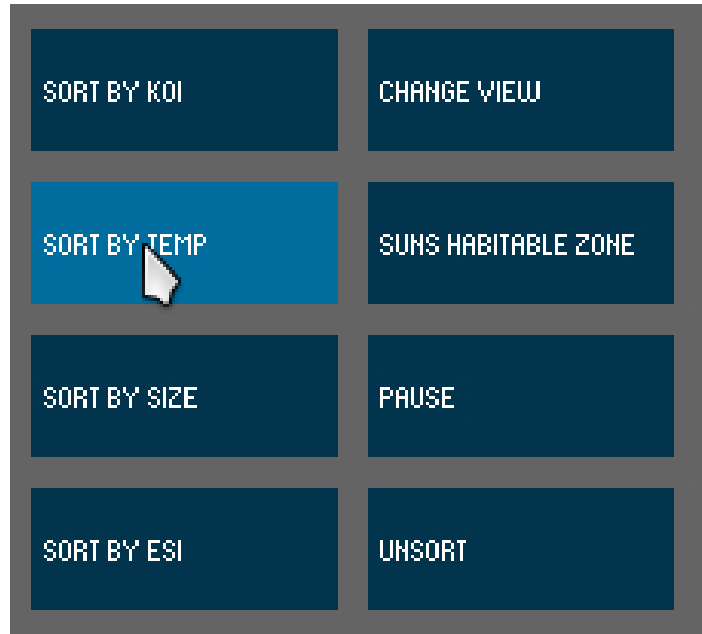


Figure 7.2: Panel of interactive buttons

Detailed information can be accessed about each exoplanet by clicking on them in the main visualisation window to make a selection. To do this a user can click on any of the orbiting exoplanets. The effect of this selection is that a text box will have further textual information about the selected exoplanet appended to it to provide the user with more detailed information as show in Figure 7.3.

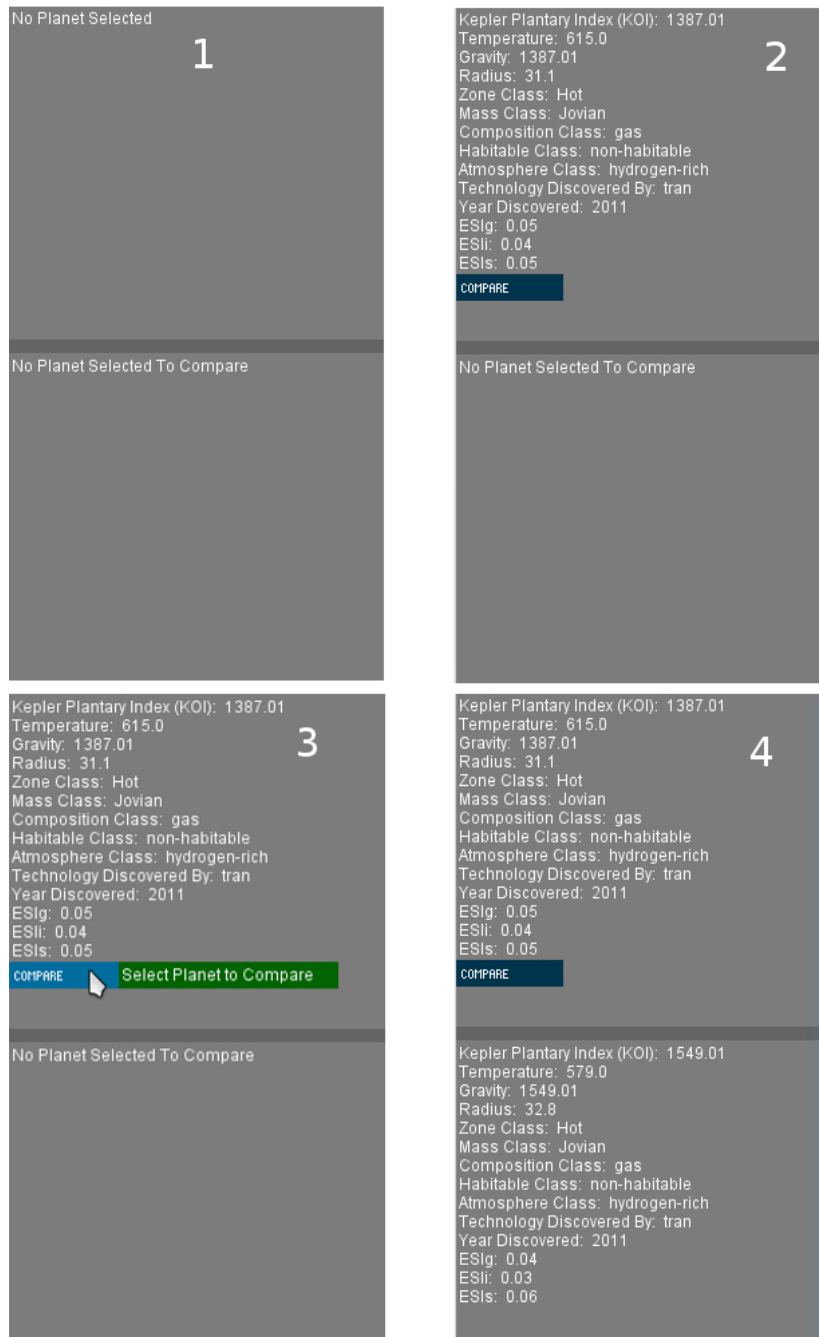


Figure 7.3: Text boxes in each possible state

When a user is unable to accurately select an exoplanet due to clustering or overlapping of exoplanets they can move the camera around in space to gain a better viewing position with which to make their selection. If this is not enough, the user can use a set of range filters to filter the exoplanets displayed as in Figure: 7.4. The attributes that can be filtered by are Kepler Object of Interest number (KOI), temperature, size, and Earth Similarity Index (ESI). These filters allow for users to fine tune the exoplanets they wish, thus allowing them to work with small multiples rather than the entire dataset. A further effect of using these filters is that a zooming effect occurs as less exoplanets are displayed. This zooming occurs each time the filters are changed as the exoplanets spread out vertically so that it allows more space between them to make selections.

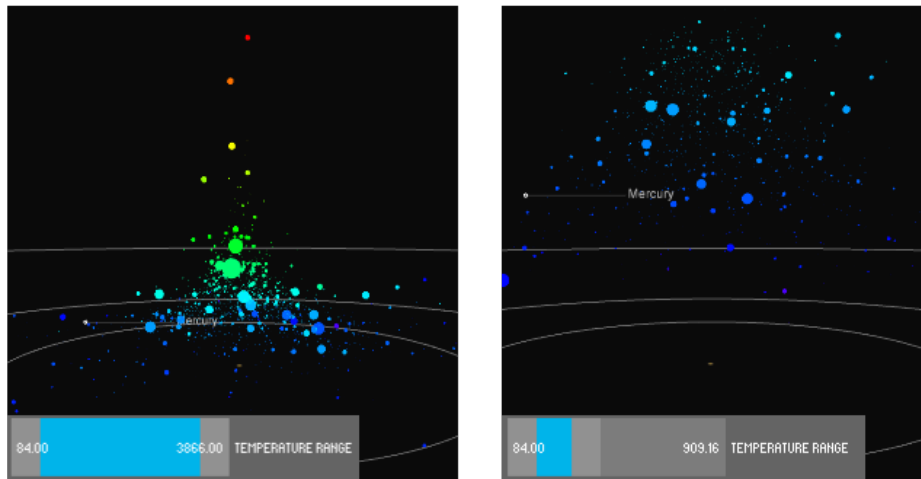


Figure 7.4: TODO

The existing Kepler Visualisation Tool allowed users to sort the exoplanets on the Y axis by their temperature and size. In IKVT this has been extended to allow sorting by Kepler Object of Interest number (KOI) and Earth Similarity Index (ESI) as shown in Figure 7.5.

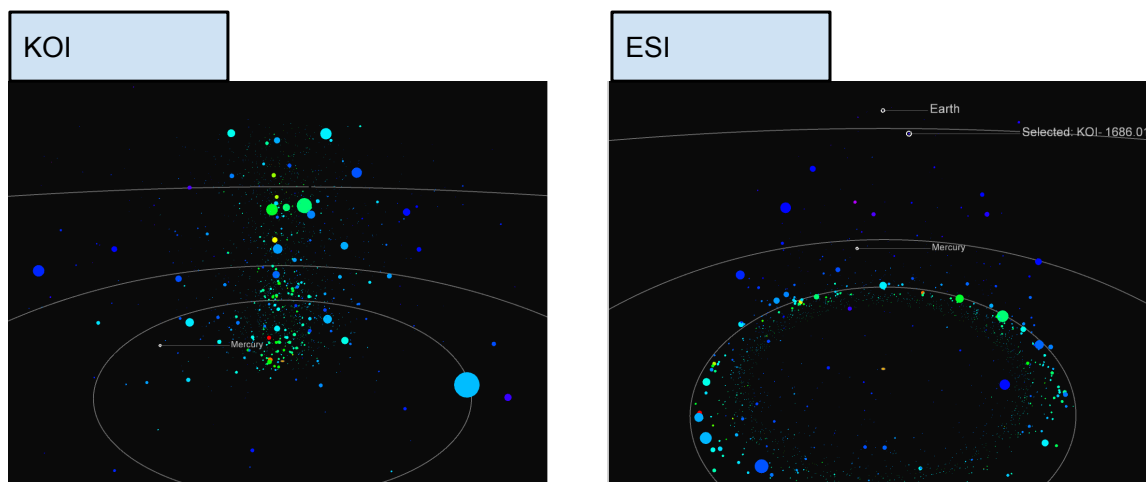


Figure 7.5: TODO

When a exoplanet is selected it is important that a user gets feedback about what they have done. In IKVT this happens in the form of the selected exoplanet becoming larger and a white outlining ring expands out to encircle it. In addition to this a label appears to the right of the exoplanet and states the Kepler Object of Interest number (KOI).

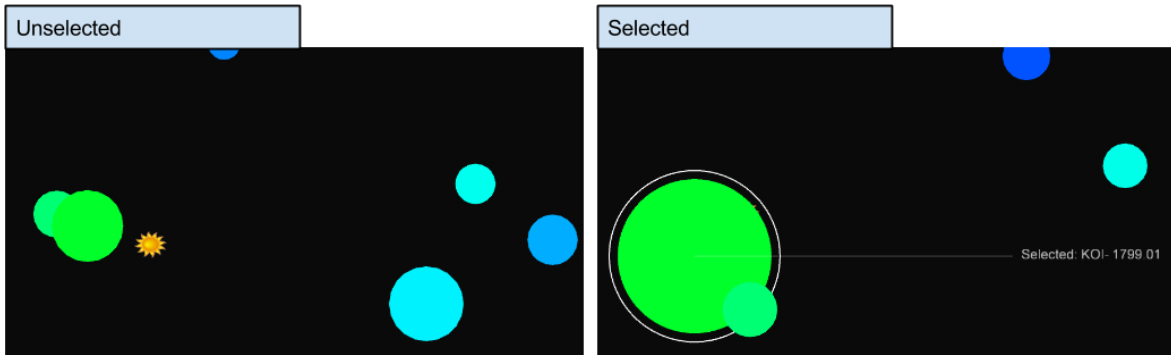


Figure 7.6: TODO

Another effect of a user making a selection is that all exoplanets that share the same star with the selected exoplanet will also become highlighted in the same way as outline above. The only difference is that in the label to the right of each exoplanet the message now informs the user that it has the “Same Star” as displayed in Figure 7.7.

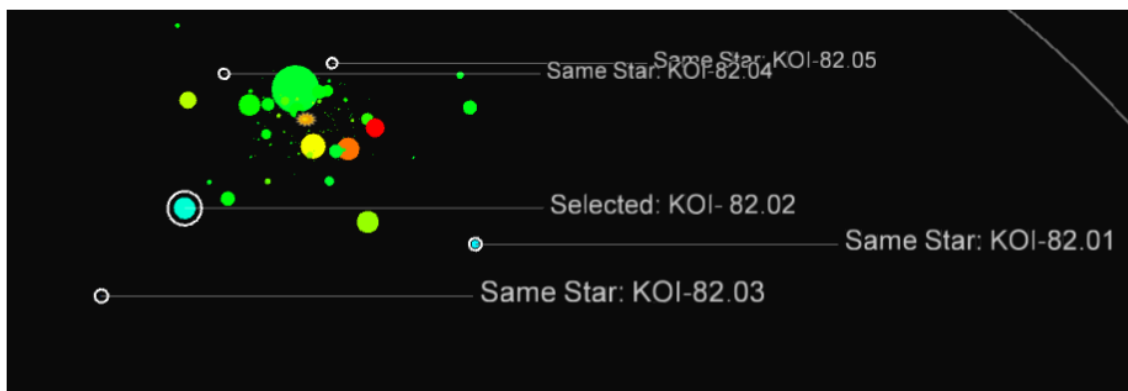


Figure 7.7: TODO

To display the habitable zones of the stars that each exoplanet orbits every time that a new planet is selected coloured rings appear to display the habitable and inhabitable zones of the star. This can be seen in Figure 7.8. In addition to this the selected planet becomes highlighted and the rest become transparent making it stand out so that users can see whether it is in a habitable zone or not.

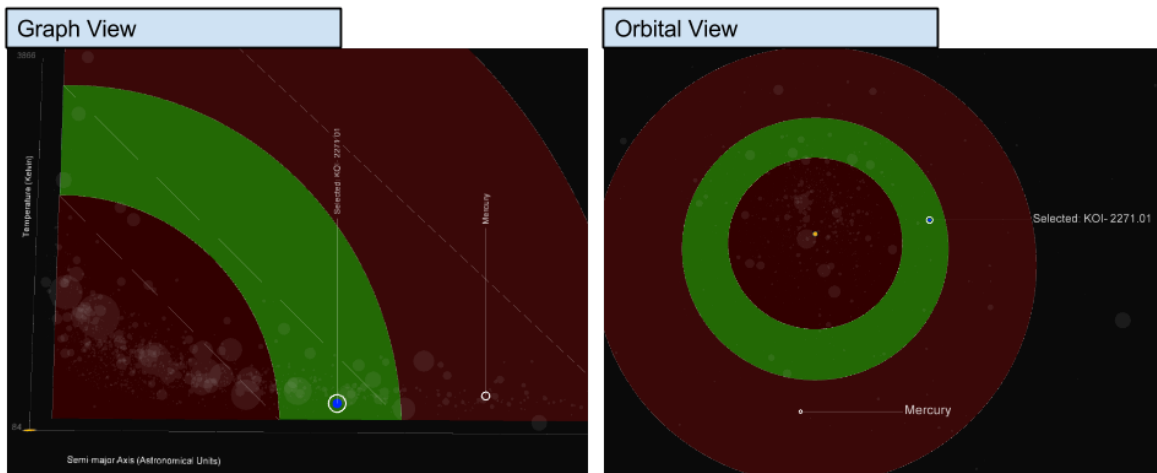


Figure 7.8: TODO

Each of these implemented elements need to be visually apparent and intuitive to use to ensure that the system can be easily used without prior experience. A way to do this is to provide clearly labeled interactive elements and tooltips explaining what they do as in Figure 7.9. These tooltips are widely used as a method of informing a user about the purpose of an item by hovering over it. This removes the need to click on a button to discover its effect.



Figure 7.9: Tooltip on hover

Due to the need for effective user interaction with the visualisation, a window is required to house all of the components discussed above. Having this window spacially separated from the main visualisation window means that users will not be drawn away from the visualisation by overlapping and intrusive controls. Each of the controls discussed above are included in this panel as shown below in Figure 7.10.

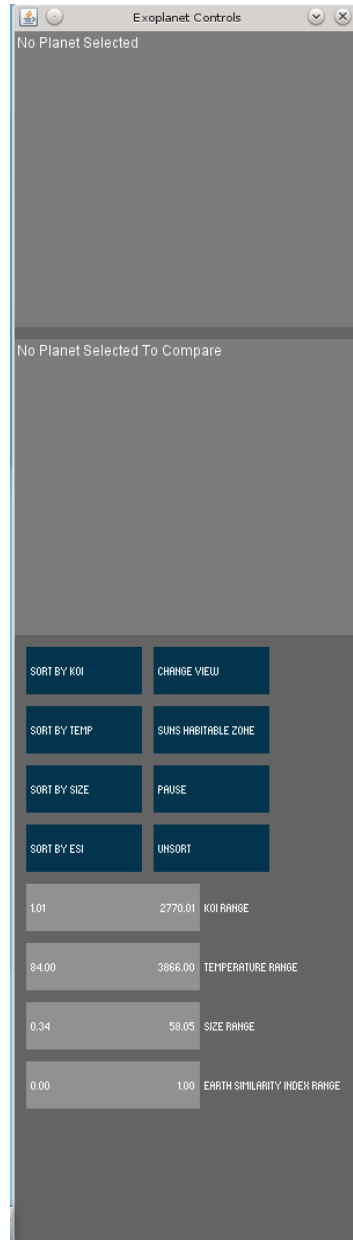


Figure 7.10: Navigation Panel Overview

At first the visualisation was layed out so that the interaction panel took up a 300 pixel strip along the bottom of the screen and the main visualisation window taking up the rest of the space as in Figure 7.11. This was found not to be suitable as the majority of the interaction and movement of visualisation elements occurs in the center of the window which this layout did not effectively utilise and caused a aspect ratio that was not ideal as the top and bottom of the planets were cut off. It was more effective to use 2 vertical columns as in Figure 7.12, to view and control the visualisation as the higher aspect ratio allowed more of the content to be seen on the screen at once, thanks to the fact that the majority of computer screens have a wide aspect ratio. As you can see by comparing the two figures, Figure 7.12 cuts off less of the visualisation and so is a more suitable choice.

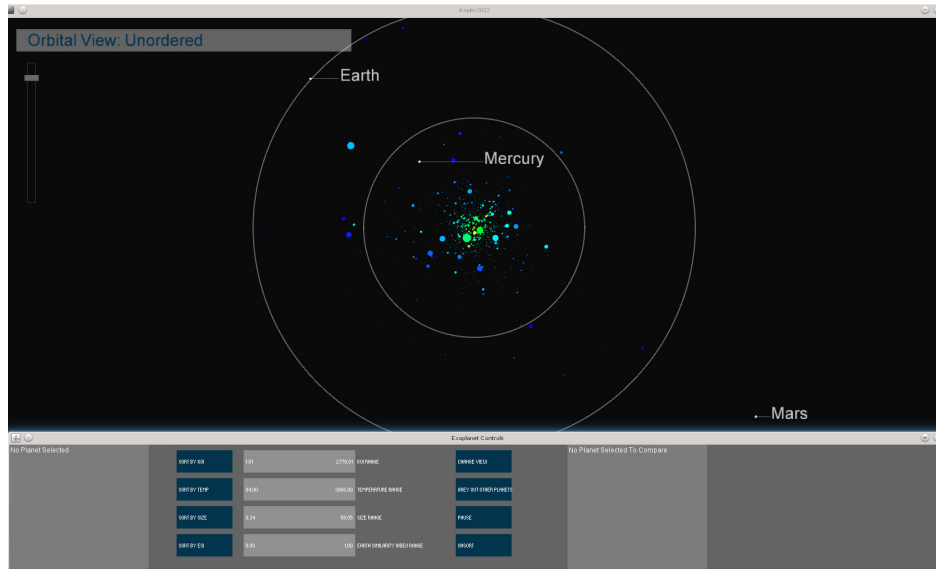


Figure 7.11: Original Horizontal Layout

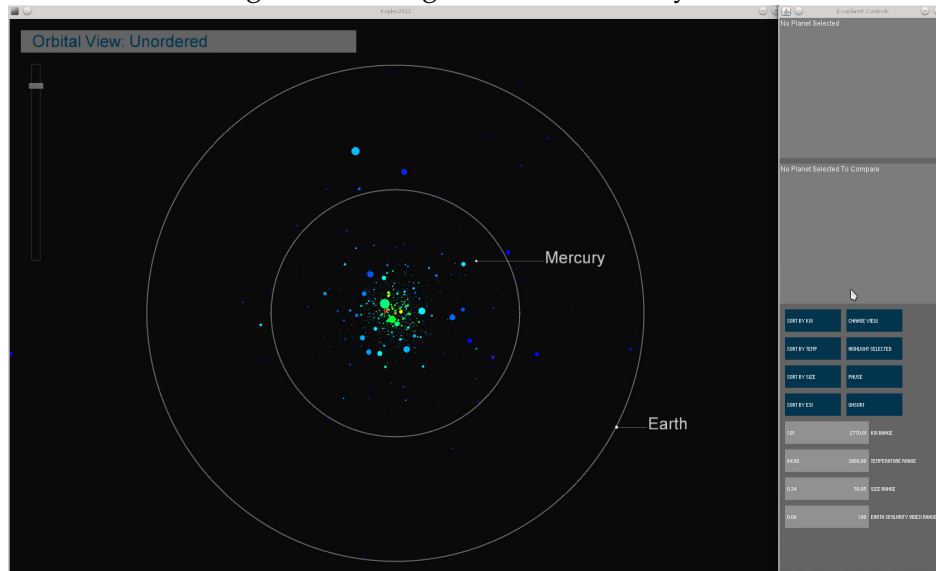


Figure 7.12: Improved Vertical Layout

The Kinect Sensor system uses all of the features discussed above and extends it by incorporating in gesture based control by utilising a Microsoft Kinect sensor. Incorporate these gesture based controls was completed by specifying gestures are detected by the visualisation which in turn modifies its state. As shown in the solution design stage there were eight gestures that were needed for the visualisation, each of which was implemented as described below

1. default cursor, hand is at rest or hovering over a planet

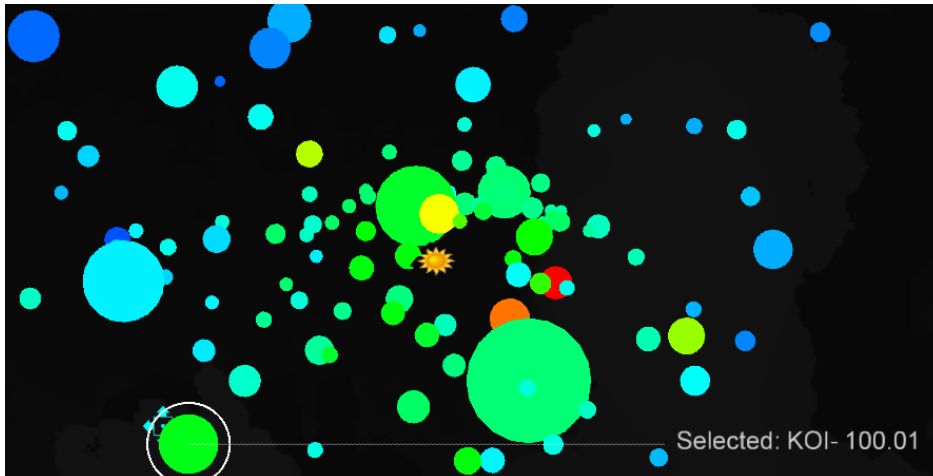


Figure 7.13: TODO

2 & 3. panning up, hand is raised or panning down, hand is lowered

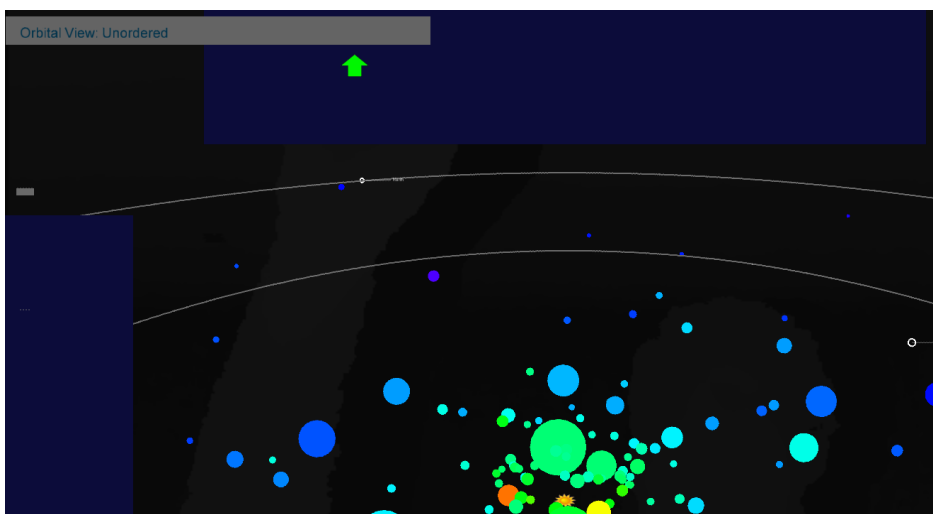


Figure 7.14: TODO

4 & 5. rotating left, hand is to the left or rotating right, hand is to the right

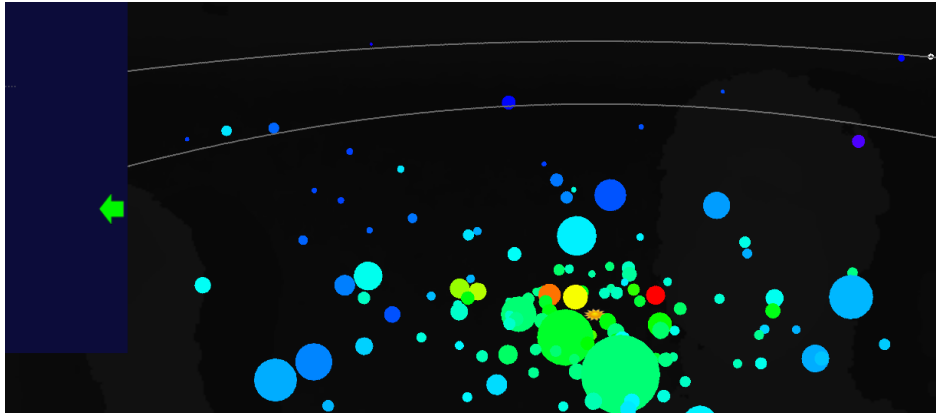


Figure 7.15: TODO

6. zooming in, hand is pressed forward

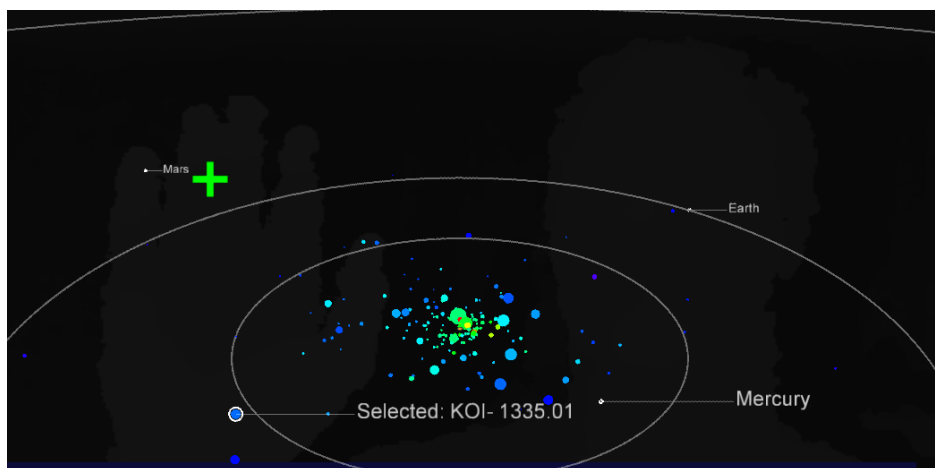


Figure 7.16: TODO

7. zooming out, hand is pulled backwards

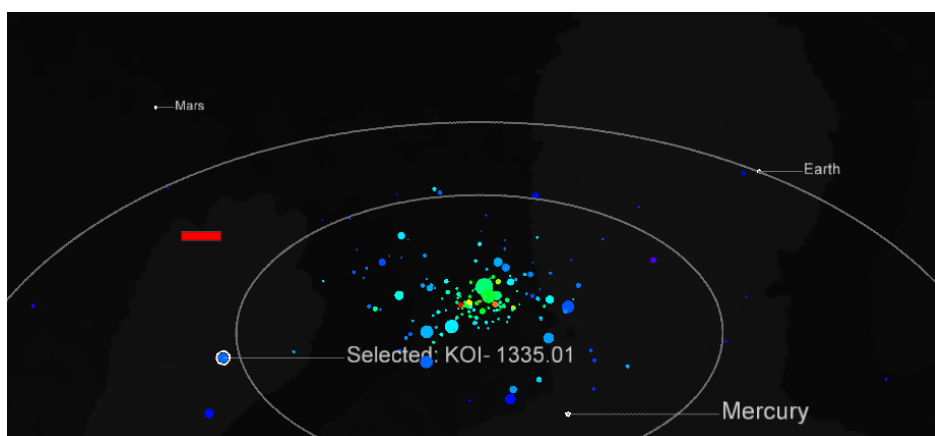


Figure 7.17: TODO

In addition to this, the screen displays the user in relation to the the visualisation, this is

done by displaying a transparent representation of the user in the background of the visualisation as can be seen in the above figures. This is important as it gives the user a way to infer where they are gesturing and as a way to show them that they are being detected by the system.

Each of the features discussed were implemented using the designs created in Chapter 7: Solution Designs to fulfill the functional requirements. The visualisation IKVT that was created can successfully display planetary information to convey knowledge to users (Requirement 1), allow exoplanets to be compared against one another (Requirement 2), order exoplanets by their ESI and by their KOI (Requirement 3), allows users to define ranges of planetary attributes to filter which planets are displayed (Requirement 4), and view the habitable zones of stars in relation to the planets orbiting them (Requirement 5). These functionalities are evaluated in the next chapter to ensure that they successfully fulfill the functional requirements as previously stated, as well as the non functional requirements that emphasise usability for users.

7.3 Problems encountered

As this project builds upon a previous system, much of the existing code and execution flow needed to be modified. This required understanding of how the system was originally built and designed. Because this system does not have any unit or integration tests, going ahead without a comprehensive knowledge of the core functionality would have led to ineffective planning and errors being introduced into the system. To address this extra time and resources were allocated to the requirements analysis and solution design stages of the project.

Due to the number of elements that needed to be displayed on screen at any one time (ie 2234 exoplanets), the load placed on a system is very high due to the need to render 2234 eclipses to represent the planets. This uncovered a bug in the processing library in which the memory use of the visualisation would periodically increase until it crashed due to an out of memory exception. After much experimentation of how to overcome this issue, I discovered that rather than trying to render a native ellipse shape in processing, if I instead rendered a Scalable Vector Graphic this bug would not manifest.

Using the Processing framework meant using a non commercial IDE that is not completely robust, for example when undoing multiple times in a row the file being modified would periodically become corrupted by lines of code being taken away or inserted into the wrong locations. The solution to this issue was to ensure that I regularly committed any changes to my version controlled system on Github [3]. Doing this meant that if at any time a file became corrupted I could easily see the changes in the file when compared against the previous commit and manually fix the file. I also reported any bugs that I discovered in the hopes that people using Processing in the future would not need to address them.

The libraries used for gesture detection with the Kinect sensor were open source as this was the only way to get it to work with Processing. These open source libraries did not have the functionality, documentation, and support that the real Software Development Kit (SDK) that is available from Microsoft would have had. Whilst this was not a roadblock in terms of development it did mean that more time was required for research and experimentation during implementation.

Chapter 8

Visualisation Evaluation

Following the completion of the implementation stage of this project a final user evaluation was carried out on the visualisation. This evaluation was primarily designed to discover whether or not the visualisation created was successful in fulfilling the requirements of the project. For the evaluation of IKVT a within subjects experiment was conducted with 10 participants. The evaluation of this project was designed to qualitatively and quantitatively assess users reactions and experiences with the IKVT. By mapping users experiences to the project requirements it was possible to evaluate the success of IKVT.

8.1 Purpose of Evaluation

Visualisation methods are often designed and evaluated by presenting results informally to potential users. No matter how efficient a visualisation technique may be, or well planned it is, if it does not convey information effectively, it is of little use. User studies offer a scientifically sound method to measure a visualisations performance. There are many reasons to pursue user studies. Studies can be used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different visualization techniques or show that a visualization technique is useful in a practical sense, according to some objective criteria, for some specific task [15]. The fundamental goal of conducting user studies is to seek insights into why particular visualisation techniques are effective. [15].

8.2 Experimental Design

8.2.1 Expectations of evaluation

From this evaluation the expectations were that users would take approximately 3 minutes to feel comfortable with using the visualisation for the basic tasks of moving the camera around, sorting the exoplanets, and using the range sliders to filter the exoplanets.

Following this accostomisation time it was expected that users could accurately complete the set of questions in a worksheet (APPENDIX QUESTIONS) whilst using the visualisation. During this stage users are expected to use both interaction methods (Keyboard & Mouse, and Kinect sensor). During the keyboard & mouse portion of the experiment the users should make more accurate selections and exhibit more effective data seeking behavior, whereas during the Kinect portion they would be more interesting in experimenting with gestures rather than attempting to gain information about exoplanets.

When users have finished using the visualisation and fill in the questionnaire asking them about their experiences with the system the expectation was that they would detail

the areas of the visualisation that they had trouble with, felt needed improvement, and that they found useful and fun. These two forms of results gathering provided both qualitative and quantitative results describing the users experiences. The expectation was that these qualitative and quantitative user results would provide a means of viewing how successful the visualisation was in terms of fulfilling the system requirements.

8.2.2 Participants

The user study was undertaken by 9 participants P2 to P10 as well as a 1 user pilot study by P1. All were either students or young professionals from a mix of specialties aged between 21 to 26 with a mix of genders with 5 females and 4 males. 5 of these participants had extensive prior experience with Kinect sensors, and all participants had experienced a 3D visualisation before. Only 6 out of 10 participants had knowledge of the exoplanets discovered by the Kepler telescope.

8.2.3 Evaluation Environment

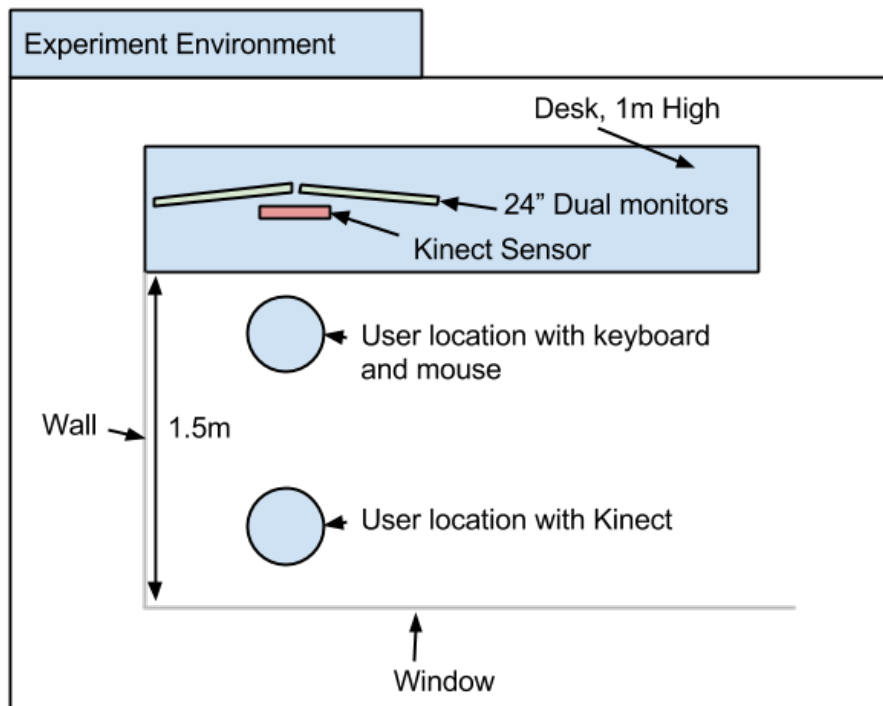


Figure 8.1: Evaluation environment

8.2.4 Evaluation Method

A poorly designed experiment will only yield results of limited value, because of this it was important to ensure that each stage of the experiment was focused on evaluating a specific area of the visualisation in relation to the project requirements. There were 3 key methods of gathering results during this evaluation; a worksheet to fill out whilst using the visualisation made up of 2 sets of questions(one for the keyboard & mouse system and one for the Kinect system)(APPENDIX), a questionnaire to fill in afterwards about the experience (APPENDIX), and the examiners observations about how the users interacted with the system.

The following are the steps that were carried out during each user evaluation to ensure that the variables were the same each time

- The user enters the room and sits down at the computer.
- They are handed the consent form and information sheet.
- After these are completed they are handed the user questionnaire and the set of questions to answer while using the system. On this questionnaire there are two sets of questions, the first is for the keyboard and mouse system, and the second if for the Microsoft Kinect system.
- They are then given a brief introduction into each of the visualisation components and what the visualisation as a whole represents
- Following this they are advised that they have 5 minutes to get familiarised with the system but they do not need to use all of this time (the amount of time taken will be recorded for analysis of how user friendly and intuitive the system is).
- Following this the user is asked to complete the worksheet by first using the mouse and keyboard system. When they feel they have answered the first set of questions they will notify the examiner who will move the user to the Kinect system to continue with the second set.
- Once the user has completed both sets of questions they are asked to fill in the qualitative user questionnaire about their experiences using the visualisation.
- Following this if the examiner has no follow up questions the user is free to leave.

8.2.5 Pilot Study

Due to the significant costs associated with running an experiment, it is valuable to conduct a pilot study with one or two participants. This allows testing and refining the experimental design before starting a full-fledged study with numerous participants [15].

The reason for conducting a pilot study for this project was to ensure that the experiment was producing the data needed to evaluate the visualisation produced as well as taking the correct amount of time to complete. In addition to this it was used to discover whether there were any aspects of the study that would interfere with the results. One participant was asked to take part in a pilot study before any results were collected, this participant is referred to as P1. This participant was asked to complete all of the activities that make up the main experiment. This pilot study took approximately 15 minutes as intended, this included the time needed for the explanation and completion of paperwork, as well as the experiment itself.

P1 successfully each of the questions whilst using the visualisation with only limited assistance from the examiner. This assistance was required due to the wording of some of the tasks users were asked to complete being ambiguous which caused unnecessary confusion which could have interfered with the results. These ambiguous questions and tasks were removed prior to the main user study. During the main study only P4 and P10 asked for clarification on the questions or tasks.

P1 had some initial difficulty using the range sliders but after a small period of experimentation began using them for the majority of tasks which turned out to be very efficient. P1 also found that whilst the range sliders were effective, they did not allow fine enough control for making small changes. The component of the visualisation that P1 had the most

difficulty was using the view depicting the location of planets in relation to their stars habitable zones. This difficulty seemed to stem from the lack of a common point of reference for each planet due to each planet having a different star with its own habitable zone.

During the Kinect portion of the experiment P1 found that being in a sitting position whilst interacting with the visualisation did not feel natural due to “being required to reach out and exert effort to hold an upright position of the arms for an extended period of time”. The following figure displays P1s reactions to questions about the experience of using the IKVT.

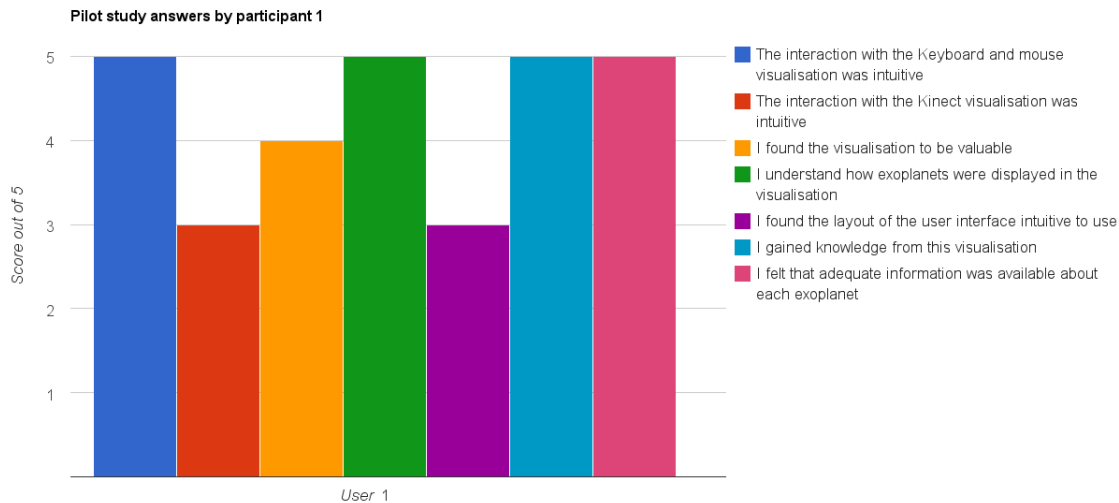


Figure 8.2: Pilot study results of P1

8.3 Results

The keyboard & mouse portion of the experiment was primarily intended to evaluate how the interaction techniques that were introduced into the visualisation aided users in their information seeking behavior. This was evaluated through the first part of the worksheet that users filled in whilst using the visualisation. These questions were designed in a way that encouraged users to make use of each of the interactive features that was implemented as part of this project.

The Microsoft Kinect portion of the experiment was intended to evaluate how users would react to interacting with the visualisation by gesture. The worksheet for this portion of the evaluation were designed to find out whether users could successfully navigate the system by gesture.

8.3.1 Qualitative Results

Evaluation of Functional Requirements

R1. The visualisation needs to display planetary information to convey knowledge to users.

The experiment demonstrated that by increasing the amount of information that was available about each exoplanet, participants were able to effectively access more information contained in the Kepler Exoplanet database than in the existing system. All participants were able to successfully complete the worksheet questions that involved

accessing information about the exoplanets that was stored in the text areas contained in the interaction panel. P8 found that a weakness of the system was the amount of concepts that needed to be understood about exoplanets planets and so including a glossary would be an improvement. A glossary would allow users to discover the meaning to any of the wording in the visualisation which would mitigate the risk of users becoming confused.

All participants reported learning something from the visualisation that they did not previously know, and those who had no knowledge of exoplanets prior to the experiment felt that they had learned something valuable. For example P4 felt that using IKVT broadened her perception of how much information we know about planets so far away.

R2. The visualisation needs to allow exoplanets to be compared against one another.

Whilst all participants used the comparison functionality during the familiarisation stage, only 3 of the participants used it while completing the worksheet. This could be because it was not made obvious enough, or because the questions asked of users did not force them to use this feature to get an answer. When the participants did use the comparison tool they were able to use it successfully and most tried it multiple times with multiple exoplanets. P3 found that being able to compare the exoplanets against one another was useful as he could leave an interesting exoplanet selected whilst comparing it against multiple other exoplanets. He found that it was easy to compare the information for each exoplanet and to get a sense of the attributes of exoplanets.

R3. The planets need to be able to be ordered by their similarity to earth (ESI) and by their Kepler Object of Interest number (KOI).

All participants used the sort by KOI and ESI functionality effectively without any confusion. P8 liked being able to toggle between the different planetary sorting and filter as he found that it gave a clearer view of the attributes in a visual manner rather than needing to look at the text areas. P7 found the exoplanets sorted by ESI to be the most interesting view. She spent an extended period of time experimenting with this during question 8 of the worksheet before moving on the later questions. P7 stated that she could find the potentially habitable planets easily as she could assume that they would need to be similar to Earth which the visualisation clearly showed. Successful

R4. The visualisation needs to allow users to define ranges of planetary attributes to filter which planets are displayed.

All participants successfully used the range sliders whilst completing the worksheet during the evaluation. The range sliders were heavily used to discover the exoplanets that were the outliers in regard to their attributes (ie, high temperatures). 3 out of 10 participants had trouble when moving between questions on the worksheet due to forgetting to reset the range sliders after using them and thus only a subset of the exoplanets were displayed. P5 found the zooming effect that occurred when planets were filtered with the range sliders useful for making more accurate selections and spent time experimenting with it. P6 found that being able to sort the planets according to attributes and then filtering them to remove the planets she did not want was a powerful tool.

R5. Users need to be able to view the habitable zones of stars in relation to the planets orbiting them.

The evaluation of this requirement showed that whilst the functionality was successfully implemented it lacked usability. All but one user in the study found that this was because it was unintuitive. What caused this was that the habitable zones of each star is different. This meant that each time a user selected a new exoplanet the location of each of the zones changed as was intended. However, this confused all but one user as they were expecting the zones to stay the in the same locations.

Evaluation of Nonfunctional Requirements

R6. All interaction methods must be visible and intuitive.

The experiment found that all interactive methods were able to be seen and used by users. However due to the design of the components being low key as to not draw attention away from the main visualisation, the participants often forgot about them especially as the interaction panel was at the side of the screen, for example P5 found that because the information panel was not central in the visualisation it required effort to break away from the main visualisation window which broke the immersion. Another issue found was that the text of the componets in the interaction was to small for some users to see clearly and quickly. A common consensus was that the layout of the interactive components were fine but could be improved by making them pop out more especially as many participants initially spot the text areas changing as planets were selected until reading the worksheet questions.

R7. The visualisation must remain uncluttered to reduce information overload.

The experiment confirmed that the amount of information displayed in the visualisation was appropriate for the users tested apart from P7 who felt this it displayed to much information at once which caused confusion. P10 felt that the interaction panel contained the right amount of information, but felt that it could be improved by changing its design to make it stand out more and emphasise each component contained in it. P4 felt that the names of some of the attributes were not made clear enough(Eg, ESI, KOI). P5 felt that limiting the amount that the user could move around in the visualisation by stopping the camera being able to show to unnecessary places would be an improvement, especially in the graph view.

R8. There needs to be two modes of interaction with the system, keyboard and mouse vs gesture based.

The experiment found that each of the interactive methods had different strengths and weaknesses. The keyboard & mouse system was the most effective for seeking information as it provided more accuracy and was easier to use the interaction panel. The Microsoft Kinect system was worse for discovering information, but it was the most fun out of the two options due to its novelty. All of the users felt that had they had more time with the Kinect system, they would have been more effective at accessing the information available. This was because they were preoccupied performing basic actions like moving the camera and selecting planets due to the short time available. For example P6 found that she used more time playing around with the Kinect system trying to select planets rather than trying to get information. All participants but P4 felt that the visualisation responded the the appropriate actions and magnitudes for each gesture. P4 felt expected the magnitiute of the visualisation changes to be more than they were, ie it should have rotated faster. P6 felt that there needed to be more movement space in which to use the Kinect as some movements felt cramped. Another weakness discovered about the Kinect sensor was that it detected the whole hand

rather than a more controllable interface like a finger. Its also found that overlapping planets made it hard to make selections with the Kinect and that it needed a way to cancel a selection without having to select another planet.

8.3.2 Quantitative Results

Evaluation of Functional Requirements

A key part of this visualisation is that it should be intuitive enough that a user can walk up to it and feel comfortable using it to explore data within a short period of time. The results showed that some users felt that they could effectively use the visualisation very quickly (within 1 to 4 minutes) whilst others took longer (up to 5 minutes) as Figure 8.3.

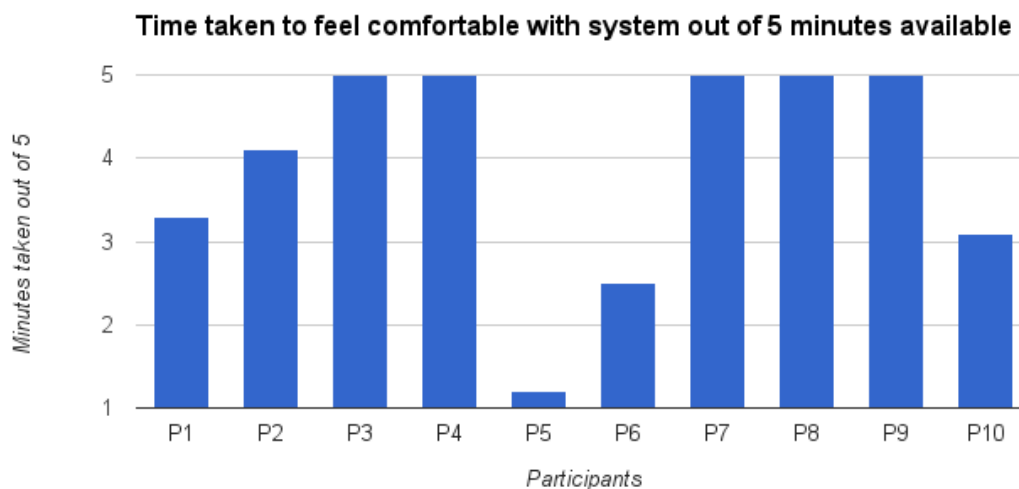


Figure 8.3: Amount of time taken out of a possible 5 minutes for users to feel comfortable with visualisation before moving onto the worksheet.

As we can see below in Figure 8.4 all users performed well in all aspects apart from with “Req: 6 Effectively used habitable zones” which the qualitative analysis also found. Another notable result was that the keyboard & mouse was rated as more intuitive than the Kinect sensor, again this is supported by the qualitative results. Apart from these key areas of interest the results are as expected with each area being scored highly.

	1(worst)	2	3	4	5(best)
Req 1: I gained knowledge from this visualisation				3	6
Req 1: I found the visualisation to be valuable			2	3	4
Req 2: Effectively used exoplanet comparisons			1	3	5
Req 3: Effectively used sort by ESI and KOI				3	6
Req 4: Effectively used range sliders			1	4	4
Req 5: Effectively used view habitable zones	7		1		1
Req 6: Comprehended how planets were represented			2	4	3
Req 6: GUI layout was intuitive		2	1	6	1
Req 7: Correct amount of information was displayed			1	4	4
Req 8: Keyboard and mouse was intuitive				4	5
Req 8: Kinect sensor was intuitive		1	3	5	

Figure 8.4: Summary of the quantitative results gathered from participants.

Seeing how different participants scores attribute to the table in Figure 8.4 helps to understand the distribution of scores. As Figure 8.5 shows, some users consistently gave higher or lower scores which could have caused a bias in the results. However it does show that some users enjoyed using the visualisation whilst others did not and the scores reflect this.

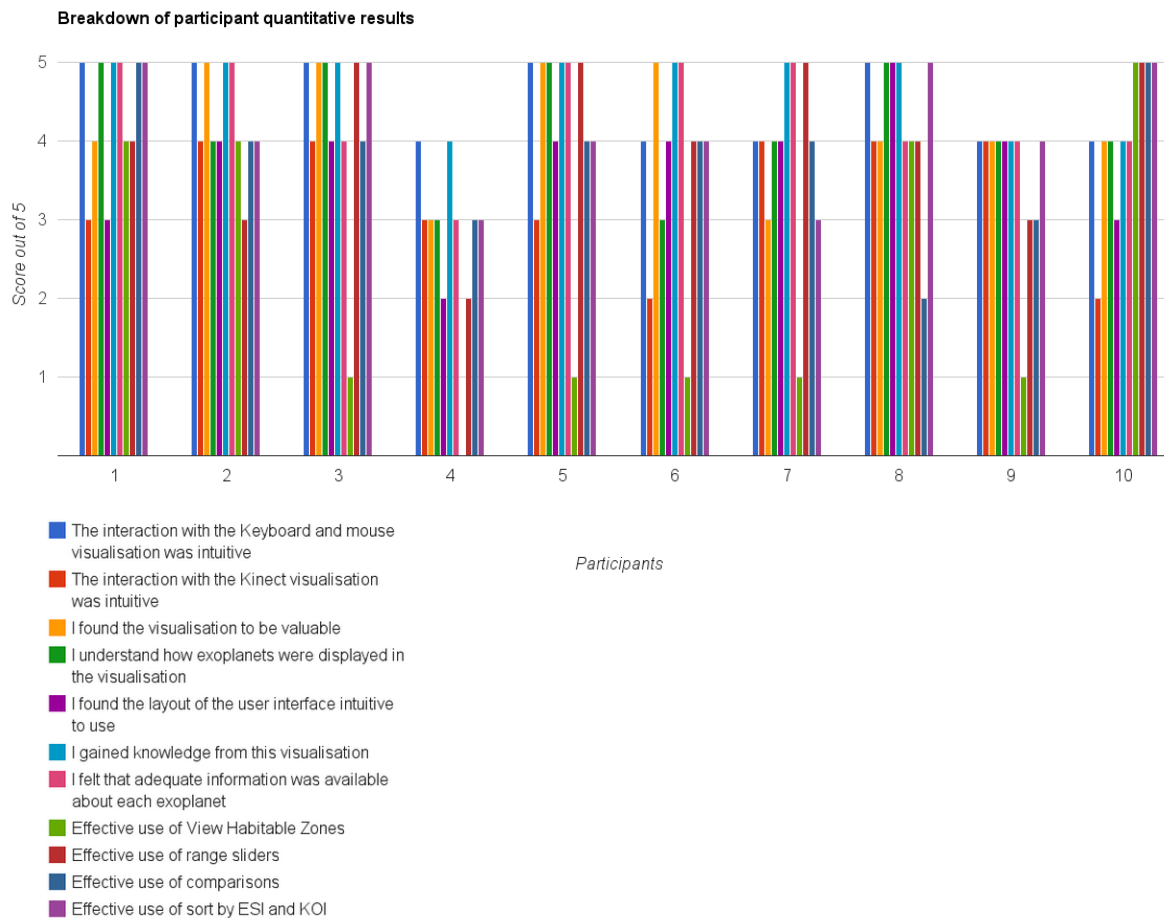


Figure 8.5: Breakdown of quantitative results between users

8.4 Discussion

8.4.1 Threats to Validity

A key factor in this user evaluation is the small number of users which was chosen due to the time limit of 300 hours which did not allow for a larger more in depth study. Because of this, the results gathered from this evaluation may not be representative of a larger population. It was also limited to a narrow demographic of you professionals and students which does not cover all of the intended users of IKVT. To amend this the population of this study would need to be expanded to contain age ranges above and below those in this study.

A further threat to the validity of this evaluation was the limit placed on participants for the familiarisation stage. Some participants may have required even more time than the 5 minutes allotted for. By cutting the familiarisation stage off at this point it may have caused some participants to be unprepared for carry out the completion of the worksheet and thus skewing the results.

8.4.2 Potential Improvements

Due to the negative results surrounding the viewing of the habitable zones of stars, this area of the evaluation should be analysed further to determine whether the tasks in the evalu-

ation relating to it were flawed, or whether the functionality and its design were flawed. To discover this it would be important to reevaluate the questions asked of user revolving around this functionality. Following this it would be possible to determine if the the functionality needed to be redesigned.

8.5 Summary of Evaluation

This evaluation of IKVT provided several key results and insights into the success of this project. The general consensus by the participants of the study was that the system had a low learning curve, was enjoyable to use, and allowed access to interesting information. There was also a common consensus among the participants that the Kinect system was more fun to use than the keyboard & mouse because of its novelty, but lacked the control that the keyboard & mouse allowed which made it less effective at accessing the information in the visualisation. The keyboard & mouse was found to be the most effective method for navigating the visualisation because of the amount of control that it offered users as well as being the interactive medium that participants had the most experience with.

The evaluation revealed one problem area in the visualisation that was related to Requirement 5 (Users need to be able to view the habitable zones of stars in relation to the planets orbiting them), and Requirement 6 (All interaction methods must be visible and intuitive). This problem was that users found that viewing where each exoplanet was located in relation to their stars habitable zones was unintuitive and difficult to use. This result could have occurred for a range of reasons, the most likely being that the evaluation questions were counterproductive to using this functionality, or that the functionality itself is flawed.

This user study served to evaluate how effectively IKVT could convey the information in the Kepler Exoplanet dataset. The findings all pointed to it being successful in this regard. However, there are areas that this evaluation could be improved to strengthen this result. The main improvement for this evaluation is to include a larger number of participants more representative of the wider population.

Chapter 9

Conclusions

9.1 Summary

This project contributes an the design, implementaion, and evalutation of an interactive 3D visualisation called the Improved Kepler Visualisation Tool (IKVT). IKVT has two modes of interaction; the traditional keyboard & mouse and the more novel Microsoft Kinect sensor.

9.1.1 System Design

The requiremnets for IKVT were designed using Cooper et al.'s user oriented design approach which emphasised using user models and user scenarios. Two user models and seven scenarios were important for creating the requirements that were used in the design, implementation and evaluation of IKVT to ensure that it solved the 4 key issues that this project hoped to address.

- Issue 1. Content in the Kepler Exoplanet Database is difficult to view and understand due to its amount and labeling.
- Issue 2. Planetary information is complex and difficult to comprehend without a visual reference due to its scale.
- Issue 3. Existing visualisations for exploring planetary data have minimal functionality for exploring the information in effective ways.
- Issue 4. Visualisations need to allow user interaction to make the most of the data they display.

9.1.2 System Implementation

IKVT was implemented in Processing, an opensource Java programming language and integrated development environment (IDE). IKVT was build upon an existing visualisation, the Kepler Visualisaion Tool [8, 19]. During the implementation stage of the project each of the designs created in the system design stage were implemented in a way that fulfilled the requirements of the system.

9.1.3 System Evaluation

IKVT was evaluated in a userstudy that gather both qualitative and quantitative results. The evaluation was designed to gather users experiences with the IKVT to examine whether or not it fulfilled the system requirements designed to solve the issues mentioned above.

The evaluation found that all of these requirements were fulfilled by the visualisation. In addition to this the participants in general found that the IKVT had a low learning curve, was enjoyable to use, and allowed access to interesting information. There was also a common consensus among the participants that the Kinect system was more fun to use than the keyboard & mouse because of its novelty, but lacked the control that the keyboard & mouse allowed which made it less effective at accessing the information in the visualisation. The evaluation also revealed that one area, viewing the habitable zones of stars, lacked usability because it was unintuitive for the users participating.

9.2 Future Work

9.2.1 System Improvements

The IKVT taken further in many different ways depending on how it is intended to be used. There is the option of using the system as a terminal that users would use at an observatory or attraction where prior knowledge of the system is limited and amount of time users would spend on the system would be small. In this case further expanding the user experience and improved Kinect interaction would be beneficial as immersion would be the decider on its success. Another option for the system would be for a standalone desktop system that users would use multiple times and so prior knowledge of how to use the system could be expected. This would mean that more complex functionality could be introduced with the expectation that it could be used by users. The systems current state could be modified to fit into either of these two options.

A weakness in the system that needs to be addressed is the star habitability view which the evaluation discovered was not intuitive enough to make it effective. To address this the functionality needs to be evaluated to discover which aspects of it cause it to be unintuitive.

The user evaluation found that gesture based control of IKVT was the most enjoyable way for users to interact with IKVT even though it was less effective at accessing information. This opens up the opportunity for further work to improve the level of gesture based control and accuracy so that it rivals the keyboard & mouse. This could be done in a range of ways from simply enhancing the intuitivity, to more advanced methods of gesture detection.

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