

A User-Driven Interface for Exploring Visualizations

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ABSTRACT

There is presently a variety of methods by which to create visualizations, and many of these require a great deal of manual intervention. Even with those methods by which it is easy to create a single visual representation, understanding the range of possible visual representations and exploring amongst them is difficult. We present a generalized interface, called *cogito*, that permits the user to control exploration of the visualization output of various manual tools, all without the requirement to modify the original tool. Programming within the *cogito* API is required to connect to each tool, but it is not onerous. We consider that the exploratory experience or activity is valuable, and that it is possible to easily create this experience for standard tools that do not normally permit exploration. We illustrate this approach with several examples from different kinds of manual interfaces and discuss the requirements of each.

Keywords: exploration, visualization, batch, scripts, modular visualization environments, toolkits, human-computer interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

When Haber and MacNabb¹ described the visualization pipeline, the question was how to realize a particular visual representation. Now, many years later, the question is how a user can find the particular visual representation that helps him or her gain some insight or communicate an idea. Sicard and Marck² found cognitive, didactic, and aesthetic logics in scientific pictures, which are not separable without knowledge of the author’s intent. For them, scientific pictures are “imbued with the ‘view’ of the author which claims to be objective. But, in fact, it is attached to ‘thought history’, technological history, scientific history and is marked by aesthetic choices, cultural bias, and perceptual practices.” All in all, the selection of a visual representation involves more than objective consideration of the problem to be depicted.

Consider that any visual representation can be decomposed into *parameters*, each with their own *values*. A parameter could be “graph type,” with values including “bar chart,” “pie chart,” “line chart,” “scatter plot,” and so on. Each visual representation can be denoted as an N -tuple, where v_i is a value of parameter P_i . In practise, not all N -tuples may correspond to valid visual representations because of incompatibilities between values of different parameters. The Cartesian product of the values from all the parameters forms the N -dimensional space of available visual representations.

$$\langle v_1, v_2, \dots, v_N \rangle \in P_1 \times P_2 \times \dots \times P_N$$

The space of available visual representations can be very large, and it can be difficult to grasp the implications of all available combinations of values. This fact only exacerbates the problem of selecting and specifying the individual elements in a visual representation. In the midst of so many combinations, it can be difficult to find a visual representation that is apposite.

The use of parameters and values to describe particular visual representations is an adaptation of Bertin’s³ retinal variables, which he used to systematically explore marks on a plane and to show how those marks could be used to construct diagrams, networks, and maps. Similar concepts are found in *Modular Visualization Environments*⁴ (MVEs) such as AVS⁵ (Application Visualization System), and the toolkit philosophy of *vtk*.⁶

Figure 1 presents a sample visual representation, based on a small dataset from Bertin³[page 100]. It provides a view of the French economy from the early 1960s. For each *département* in France, the data provides: the

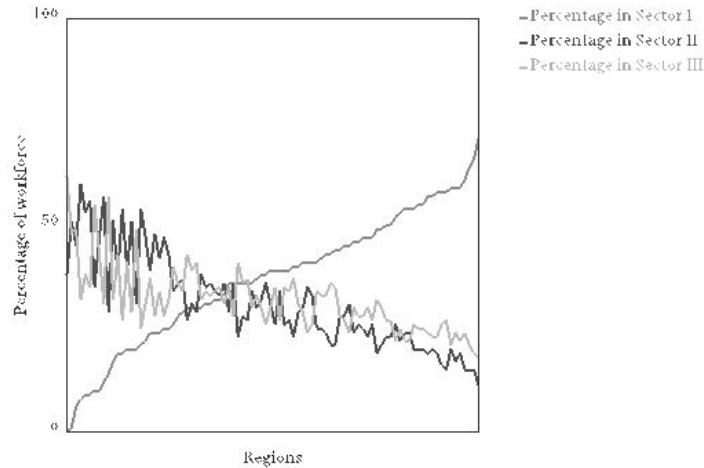


Figure 1. One possible visual representation of Bertin’s data, constructed from parameters and values that specify features including the graph type, the annotation, the sorting of the data, and the colours.

workforce (in thousands of workers) for each of the three sectors (primary, secondary, and tertiary) in the economy; the total workforce (the sum of the three sectors); and the percentage of the workforce in each sector.

Bertin³ remarked that “to construct 100 DIFFERENT FIGURES from the same information requires less imagination than patience. However, certain choices become compelling due to their greater ‘efficiency.’ ” But the question of efficiency is closely linked to the task at hand and the user’s experience with the elements of a visual representation, as Casner⁷ describes. Therefore, *cogito*⁸⁻¹⁰ is designed to facilitate, through interactive articulation and evaluation of visual representations, each user’s own assessment of efficiency, while requiring far less patience than a manual approach.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces relevant background about visualization tools. Section 3 describes the basic architecture of *cogito* and how it can act as an interface to various existing visualization tools. Section 4 describes use of the *cogito* with *vtk*, *GNUplot*,¹¹ *R*,¹² and *openDX*¹³ in examples. Finally, Section 5 presents some conclusions and areas for future work.

2. BACKGROUND

Through adaptation of the classification of Kochhar *et al.*,¹⁴ it is possible to distinguish manual, automatic, and augmented visualization systems based on the relationship that they establish between human and computer.

Automated systems, like BOZ,⁷ appear to the user as black boxes, which are given input and produce output. They address the concern¹⁵ that the size of the visualization parameter space is typically so large that the user would be overwhelmed if he or she had to deal directly with it in its entirety.

Augmented systems aid the user by allowing certain well-defined tasks to be performed primarily by the computer, with the effect of increasing people’s capabilities to tackle complex problems. *Design Galleries*,¹⁶ for example, works to provide a good sampling of the range of alternatives based on a user-specified means for comparison, given *a priori*. Jankun-Kelly and Ma’s spreadsheet interface¹⁷ allows exploration with greater context as the rows and columns of the spreadsheet show the values of the two different parameters being manipulated at any one time. However, the user must specify how each visual representation is to be constructed. Both of these systems lack flexibility, though, because they require a tight coupling with the software that realizes the alternatives for display. Furthermore, the *a priori* specification of an objective function required by Design

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Galleries can limit the possibility for exploration. The spreadsheet approach is limited because it works with only two parameters at a time, though many more may be involved. The spreadsheet approach therefore decreases the likelihood that the best available visual representation may be found by the user.

Manual systems provide the building blocks, but leave the responsibility for assembling these building blocks with the user. Therefore, exploration requires patience on the part of the user, who must explicitly specify new combinations and then keep track of his or her experiments in case any of them should need to be revisited. Even for problems with relatively small parameter spaces, an exhaustive evaluation of alternatives is almost always impractical. Instead, humans rely on heuristic search methods, which are likely to find acceptable solutions in a reasonable amount of time (what Simon¹⁸ called *satisficing*). These search heuristics can be of two sorts, in general. If the problem is well-understood, local search techniques may be employed effectively. If the problem is new, however, a global search of the space may be better suited to the exploration of alternatives. Manual systems do not necessarily lend themselves to either form of search. In both cases, either new programming must be done or an existing program must be invoked in a new way. Furthermore, humans are not suited to the bookkeeping required for these searches of parameter space and therefore usually rely on some form of external memory. Still, a manual approach remains attractive for those people who write the code for their own use or for use by a very focused community. That neither a global nor a local search is well-supported in general makes these searches less of a concern to developers of manual systems.

In particular, we consider manual programs as falling into one of three categories: Batch Invocation Programs (BIPs) with *GNUplot* and *R* as examples; Scripted Modular Visualization Environments (SMVEs) with *openDX* as an example; and Toolkits and Application Programming Interfaces (TAPIs) with *vtk* as an example. These are considered, in order, in the following paragraphs.

Fox¹⁹ has built a graphical user interface for *R* to support an introductory course in statistics. His goal is to ease introductory users into script writing directly in the Tcl/Tk²⁰ command environment. Similarly, *xgfe* (X-windows GNUplot Front End)²¹ presents users with the GNUplot functionality through the more familiar menus and buttons. Both of these graphical user interfaces are intended to introduce users to the native environments of each tool. They provide fairly complete access to the underlying capabilities of each tool.

openDX comes with a graphical user interface and a scripting language. The graphical user interface provides visual programming capabilities, much like *AVS*⁵ and others. These were developed to ease the programming requirements for visualization. They provided a visual programming capability that offered several advantages for development over coding alone. However, visual representations constructed in these systems are dependent on these systems for viewing. The scripting interface allows a more traditional programming experience and may be preferable for more complicated tasks.

The Visualization Toolkit,⁶ otherwise known as *vtk*, provides a great many capabilities to its users. As a toolkit, it can be seen as a collection of utilities or as a library of functions that a programmer may employ. An implementation using *vtk* requires programming knowledge, and so *vtk*'s direct user base is limited to people with knowledge of at least one of the languages for which there exists an interface in *vtk*.

The Visualization Toolkit began with a focus on coding that is more traditional than any of the other examples thus far considered. Its graphical interfaces have been developed more recently. Lefer²² describes a parsing system that analyzes the C++ implementation files of a *vtk* distribution, and provides the user with a graphical user interface mapped to the classes found within *vtk*. This interface allows direct manipulation of the *vtk* object properties without knowledge of any programming language but it also introduces users to the complexity of *vtk* itself. The user must still know something of *vtk*'s render pipeline in order to construct a valid visual representation, and he must also understand what values are valid for a given interface within *vtk*. It does not provide a means to abstract the visualization from the specific tools needed to realize it. *MayaVi*²³ and *QteVTK*²⁴ represent more general means of interacting with a particular *vtk* visual representation using tools that are relevant to the exploration of the underlying data. As such, they have had success in providing the benefits of both MVEs and *vtk*.

In all of the aforementioned cases of interfaces, it is difficult to get far from the underlying tool and to create an abstraction that is apart from command syntax. *Side-Views*²⁵ modified the menus inside of GIMP *

*GNU Image Manipulation Program, <http://www.gimp.org>

to show previews of various commands. However, this fine-grained preview requires substantial knowledge of the application before it can be undertaken.

According to Perkins,²⁶ a space can appear either as clue-rich (homing), in which the solution is evident, or clue-poor (Klondike), in which the solution must be found by “prospecting.” Insight may be gained by the transformation of a space from Klondike to homing, possibly through exploration. The power of the augmented systems, which support various forms of exploration, cannot easily be brought to the existing manual systems. What is required is a means of generating automatically particular alternatives for the user to evaluate. In the next section, we describe how this can be done through the *cogito* system.

3. ARCHITECTURE

An interface for this exploration must be such that a user with little syntactic knowledge can navigate the space. The interface must produce complete visual representations and show enough context to permit navigation. A schematic is shown in Figure 2. Sims²⁷ is one of several inspirations that embody what is called “interactive evolution”: a user directs the search of the visualization parameter space by making selections of complete visual representations, and those selections determine the makeup of the subsequent search space. The *cogito* system supports the user by managing the display of alternatives to illustrate the breadth of what is available (see Figures 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8). Some systems that provide multiple coordinated views²⁸ require a great deal more from the user.

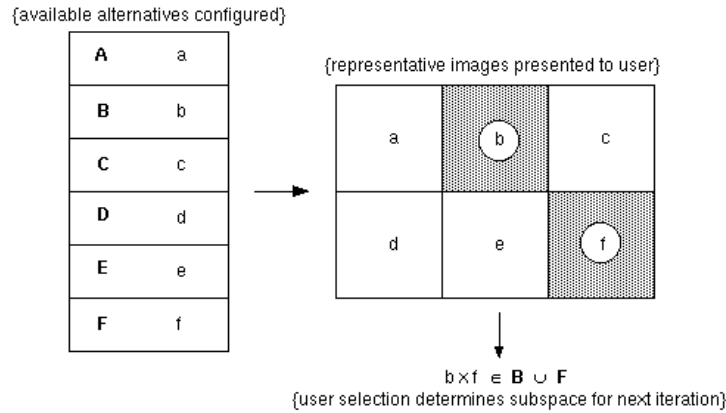


Figure 2. Schematic look at the interface: the parameter space of available alternatives is partitioned according to user-specified viewing criteria. Each partition (A – F) has a representative element (a – f), which is displayed to the user in separate cells in the interface. The subspace for the next search iteration is based on the user selection (b and f).

The main premise of the *cogito* architecture is interchangeability. The interface does not rely on a particular task or implementation of the parameter space. This was accomplished through separation of the *cogito* system into 3 distinct portions (Figure 3).

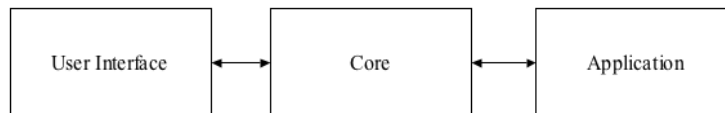


Figure 3. Design model for *cogito* system.

The *User Interface* portion implements the exploration aspects of *cogito*, and simply renders and responds to the interaction points—buttons, list selections, and so forth. This layer encapsulates each user’s conception of the problem.

The *Core* portion provides the main functionality of *cogito* itself. The *cogito* Core handles the invocation of the manual visualization tool controlled by the view selected by the user. In response to each invocation, the manual visualization tool provides a completed visual representation in a form that can be displayed in one of the cells of the interface, as depicted in Figure 2. This portion also handles the grouping of image layouts, history navigation, and system initialization.

The Application portion provides the abstract interface by which the Core can communicate with a variety of manual visualization tools. To interface with *cogito*, the visualization system must articulate the parameters and values that it has to offer (this can be influenced by what the user wants to accomplish). This information is used by the *Core* portion to construct each invocation of the tool. It is useful to consider each of the manual visualization tools as providing a service to the *cogito* system, for the realization of requested visual representations (Figure 1, for example). The *cogito* system then becomes an example of a service-oriented architecture.

Batch Invocation Programs are programs that can provide a visualization for a given parameter set through non-interactive techniques. Typically called from a command prompt with options appended to the execution command or a configuration file, *cogito* can interact with these programs by constructing command-line invocations with parameter flags or customized configuration files. *Cogito* supports a sophisticated XML-based configuration language that allows a developer to specify a parameter space and command syntax for virtually any batch-style process.

Modular Visualization Environments are typically designed to encourage direct user interaction, supporting only limited forms of inter-process communication. However, many MVEs also provide scripting interfaces that can provide batch-style interaction. Using a specially generated script, MVEs can become like Batch Invocation Programs with the same style of interaction. A developer is then responsible for both an XML configuration and a scripting interface, but generally only the most basic of script files is needed. This script file provides a template or foundation for a wide variety of visual representations available from the MVE.

Toolkits and APIs provide perhaps the most potential flexibility for visualization. It is frequently very interesting to explore the potential of an API such as OpenGL or *vtk*. In most cases, a toolkit developer can produce a simple program that *cogito* can use as a batch invocation process, but sometimes the full flexibility or efficiency of the program is best obtained through live interaction. *Cogito* supports a dynamic library version of application interface, to extend the potential for space exploration beyond simple static images or batch program output. A developer creates a shared object that extends *cogito*'s application interaction API, and generates whatever form of representation is desired.

By addressing these three major forms of interaction for manual programs, *cogito* provides a great deal of both control and flexibility. Virtually any existing manual application can work within the *cogito* interface, usually with no modification to the existing code so long as batch-like interaction can be achieved. The only caveat is that someone with knowledge of how to interact with the manual application must be available when the application is first placed within the *cogito* interface. Note that detailed knowledge of the manual application's capabilities is not required.

This design allows the same interface to be used for a variety of different visualization tools. It is then easy for a user to switch between tools. A user needs only understand what options are available, not necessarily how they work, and *cogito* frees the user to explore the ramifications of these options in an intuitive and consistent manner. Interface specification is done in terms of the user's view of the parameter space instead of the application's available functionality.

4. EXAMPLES

A common element to all interaction is the XML configuration file. One such file is included in Figure 4 and is described in the following subsection.

4.1. Batch Invocation Programs (BIPs)

To demonstrate the effectiveness of a *cogito* connection to Batch Invocation Programs, we present sample applications created for R¹² and GNUplot.¹¹ These applications represent a class of applications designed for statistical analysis, and they can generate a variety of interesting graphics to enhance and present tabular data.

GNUplot supports very simple interaction through configuration files that can contain data and instructions for representing that data. In our very simple example, we explore the various ways that a simple curve based on four data points can be graphed with a set of different graphing parameters. The data points remain constant, but we explore the various ways they may be represented.

In Figure 4, the GNUplot XML configuration file is shown. GNUplot works with an external configuration file, so each of the named *components* is replaced in the example configuration file `example.gpt` with values drawn from the ranges defined in the XML file. As can be seen in this example, floating-point numbers can be defined by a range instead of listed explicitly. The `y1coord` is defined to be any value between 0.05 and 0.95 (inclusive) with samples taken at increments of 0.1. Meanwhile, the graph types, which are explicit named types from within GNUplot, are simple string types that are inserted into the configuration file directly.

```
<?xml version="1.0"?>
<!DOCTYPE xmlappmodule SYSTEM "cogito-conf.dtd">
<xmlappmodule>
  <source>
    <component type="float" name="y1coord">
      <valmin>0.05</valmin>
      <valmax>0.95</valmax>
      <valinc>0.1</valinc>
    </component>
    <component type="string" name="graphtype">
      <value>csplines</value>
      <value>bezier</value>
      <value>unique</value>
    </component>
    <component type="float" name="y2coord">
      <valmin>0.05</valmin>
      <valmax>0.95</valmax>
      <valinc>0.1</valinc>
    </component>
  </source>
  <output>
    <program>
      <command>/sw/bin/gnuplot</command>
      <workingdir>/</workingdir>
      <configfile index="1" type="gpt">${APPDIR}configs/example.gpt</configfile>
      <outfile type="png" configfile="true"/>
    </program>
  </output>
</xmlappmodule>
```

Figure 4. XML configuration file for GNUplot.

R¹² is a much more complex data analysis tool. Typically used as an interactive command-based statistical interpreter, R command files are more akin to script files. R provides many more display options than GNUplot, and our example program allows a user to explore all the different representations of a multivariate survey of student abilities. Figure 6 shows our R sample through a *cogito* interface.

4.2. Scripted Modular Visualization Environments (SMVEs)

OpenDX is a visual programming environment for data visualizations. Using data objects and connective symbols, users can create various visual representations of a variety of data types. It is particularly suited to displaying measurements of physics experiments. Moreover, its connectivity-style interaction is very powerful and can lead to a variety of new ways to explore the data—but it is difficult to intuit how the data connections work and what a given connection “means”. Figure 7 compares the normal OpenDX interface to an example running under *cogito*.

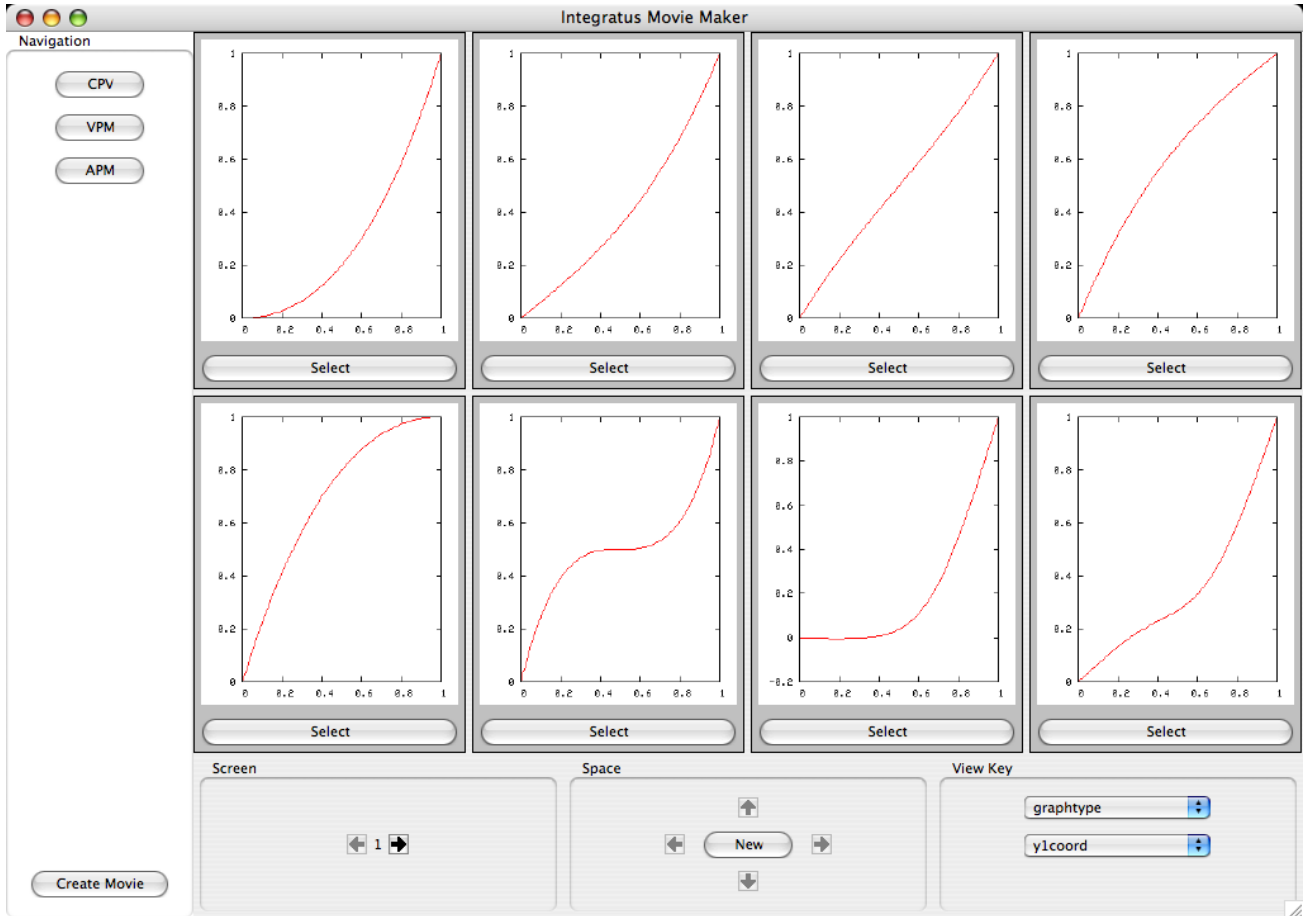


Figure 5. Screen shot of the *cogito* interface used to explore curve variations available within *GNUplot*.

As it is a graphical programming tool, OpenDX does not intuitively integrate with a batch-oriented paradigm for interaction. To create a batch-style interaction, though, is relatively simple. A basic image path is designed in OpenDX, and saved as an OpenDX script. These are ASCII text documents, so *cogito* can, with its XML configuration language, be trained to generate modified OpenDX scripts.

For our example, the space explored covers a selection of transforms that can be performed on a given mesh model within OpenDX. This exploration allows a user to become comfortable with the various effects that can be applied to a mesh, and only the developer of the initial script and XML configuration need be moderately familiar with the semantics of OpenDX.

As a highly sophisticated programming environment, OpenDX produced the largest sample space of all of our examples (see Table 4.3). Many of the explored components, that is, inputs to the program, are named cryptically and are difficult for a user to understand. But by exploring the parameter space visually through *cogito*, the user can ignore the complexity of the underlying software and focus on selecting the visual representation that is most meaningful to him or her.

4.3. Toolkits and Application Programming Interfaces (TAPIs)

Our example of an API interacting with *cogito* is the *vtk* API.⁶ For this example, we attempted to replicate the Shapes⁹ application for *cogito*, which was originally implemented in OpenInventor.²⁹ For this simple example, it was sufficient to create a basic command-line wrapper for *vtk* that runs in two modes: a batch mode that generates a single image of a shape based on parameters given on the command line, and an interaction mode that launches an exploration window for a given shape when launched without a specified output file.

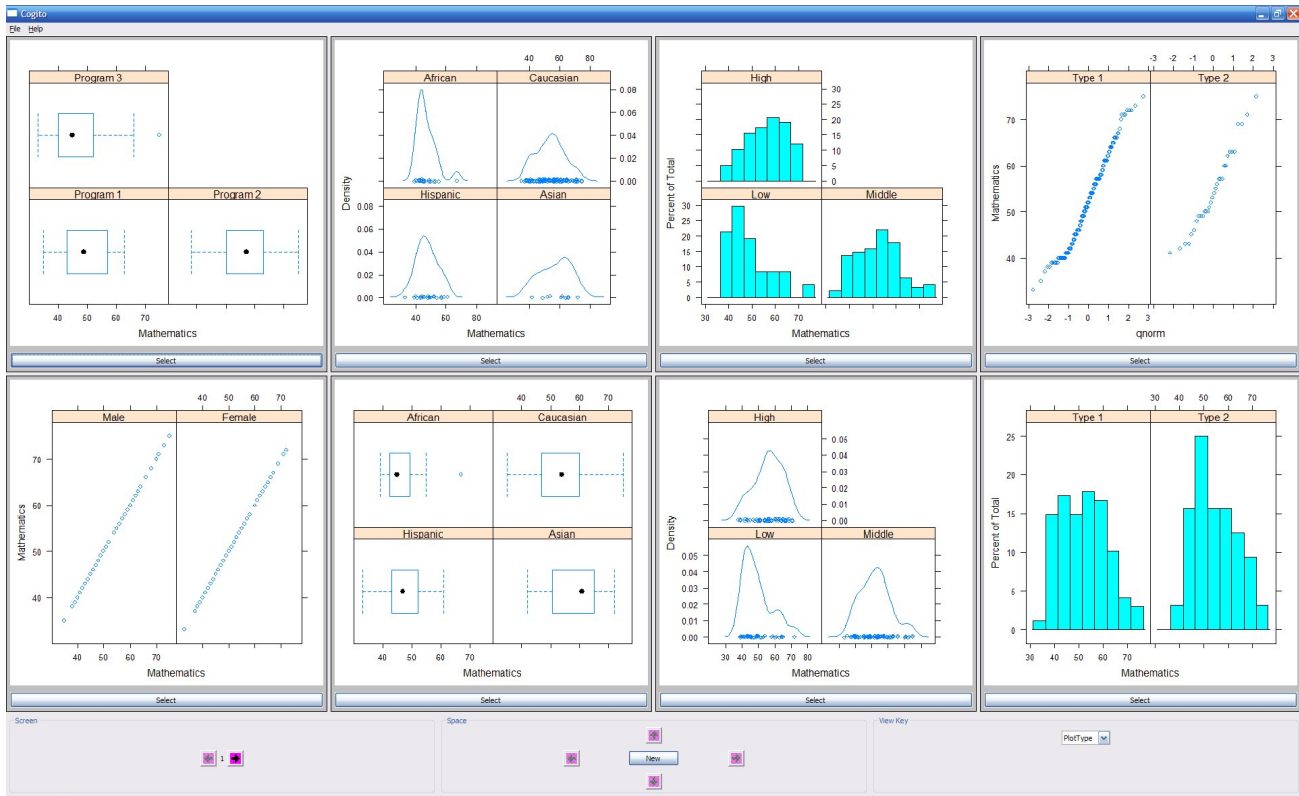


Figure 6. R through a cogito interface.

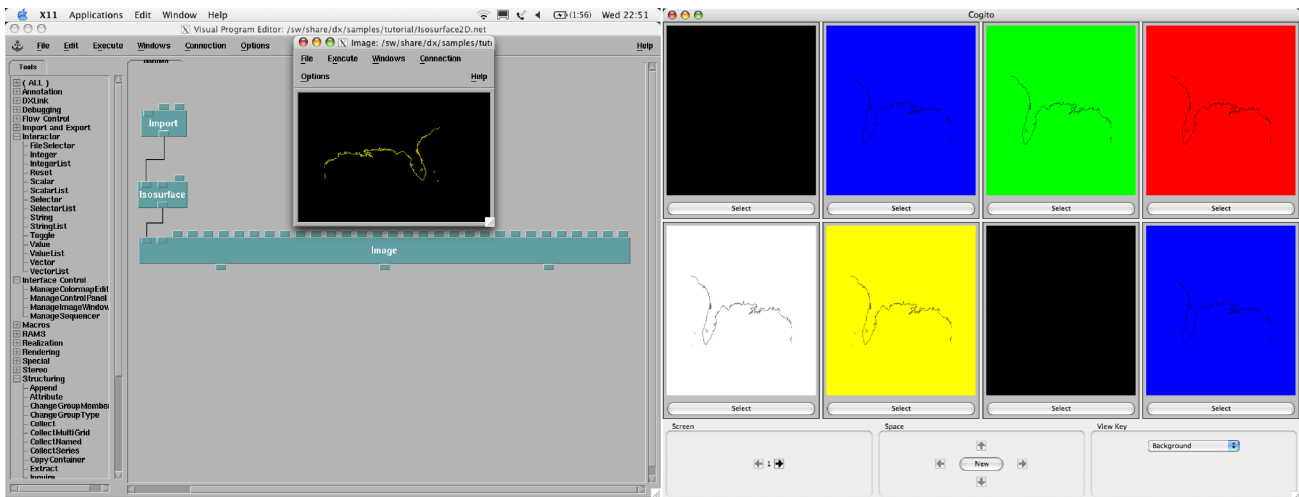


Figure 7. On the left, a simple openDX application in the native graphical user interface. Notice the number of possible arguments to “image” (denoted by the number of tabs on the upper edge of the “image” block). On the right, a similar application presented through the cogito interface.

Example Program	Components Explored (Elements)	Total Space
GNUplot	First Y-Coordinate (10) Second Y-Coordinate (10) Interpolation curve (3)	300
R	Plot Type (5) X-Axis (5) Y-Axis (6) Factor (6)	900
OpenDX	Background (6) Colour (6) Direction (4) Value (10) Number (10)	14,400
<i>vtk</i>	Shapes (13) Colours (3) Transparency (4) Rotations ($4x$, $4y$, $4z$)	9,984

Table 1. Size of parameter space for each example.

The *cogito* screen generated for *vtk* is seen in Figure 8. An additional feature of this particular example is the addition of the “Examine” button, defined as an extra action in the XML configuration. When the button is clicked, the same batch application is launched with the same configuration parameters. However, without any output specification, the program is immediately launched into the interactive three-dimensional viewer for the *vtk* sample. This feature demonstrates how *cogito* can be used to move from an exploration environment to a more traditional application seamlessly, allowing the user to take his or her final decision and begin working with it directly.

Even though this is a simple example, the space of available visual representations contains nearly 10,000 alternatives: $(13 \text{ shapes}) \times (3 \text{ colours}) \times (4 \text{ transparencies}) \times (4 \text{ rotations in } x) \times (4 \text{ rotations in } y) \times (4 \text{ rotations in } z) = 9,984$ points in the parameter space. The parameter space sizes of all of our examples are summarized in Table 4.3.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The *cogito* interface provides the means both to obtain a global view of the contents of the parameter space and to make local modifications through the “New Space” dialogue box (see Figure 9). Being able to change one’s view of the current parameter space (through the “View Key”) enables a user to transform the space into one that is “homing.”²⁶

Insight gained from the use of the *cogito* system could be applied to constructing a meaningful objective function for use with *Design Galleries*.

Adaptation of the *cogito* interface to the various manual systems was straightforward, making further adaptations possible. We have shown that it is easy to create an exploratory experience for a manual tool with which a user might be familiar. A promising route may be the further abstraction of the applications from any specific tools, which would enable one to switch easily between *GNUplot*, *R*, *OpenDX*, and *vtk* as the tool which realizes the visualizations. From the user perspective, the same conceptual view of all these tools can be maintained.

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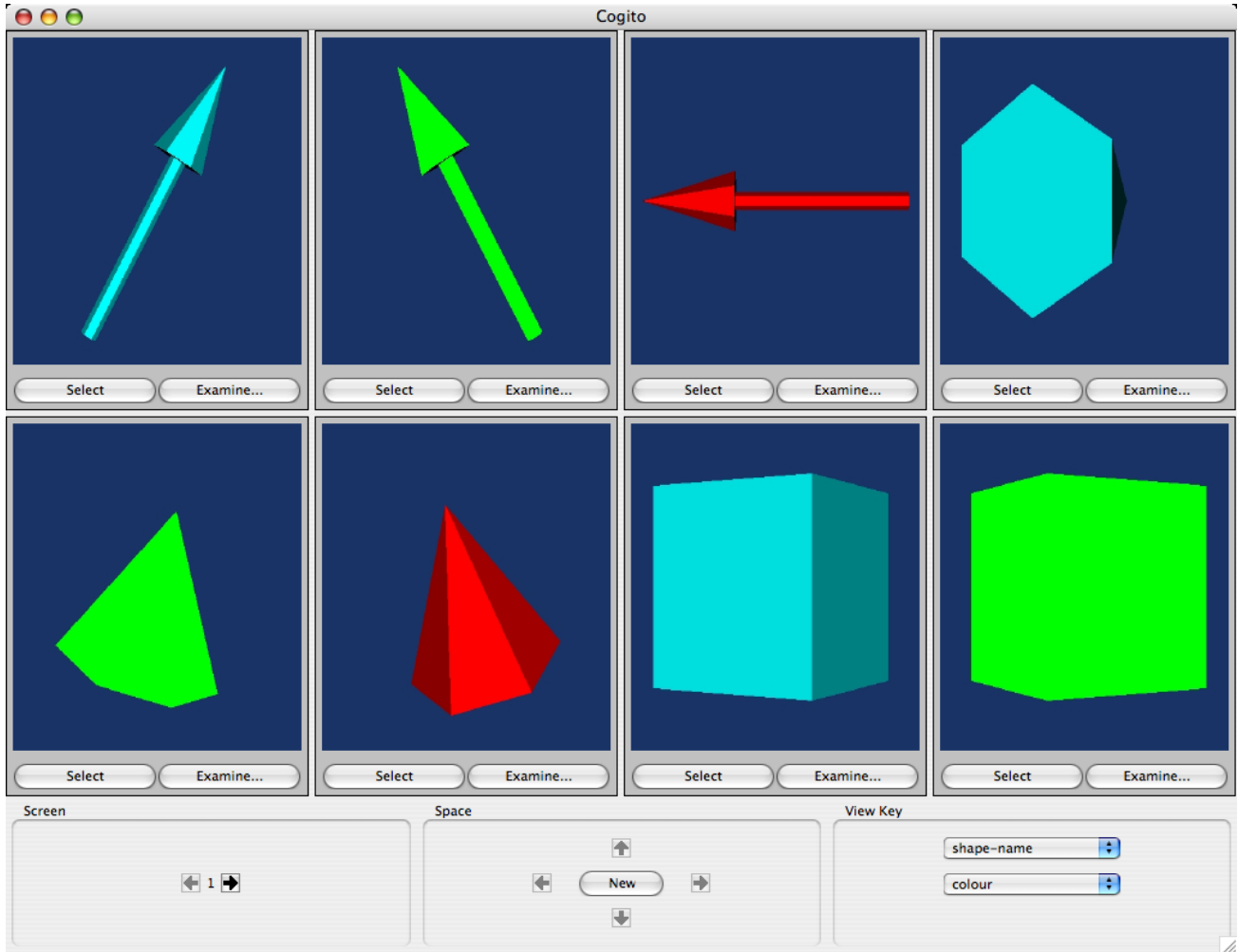


Figure 8. A sample screen showing the *cogito* interface to the *vtk* application.

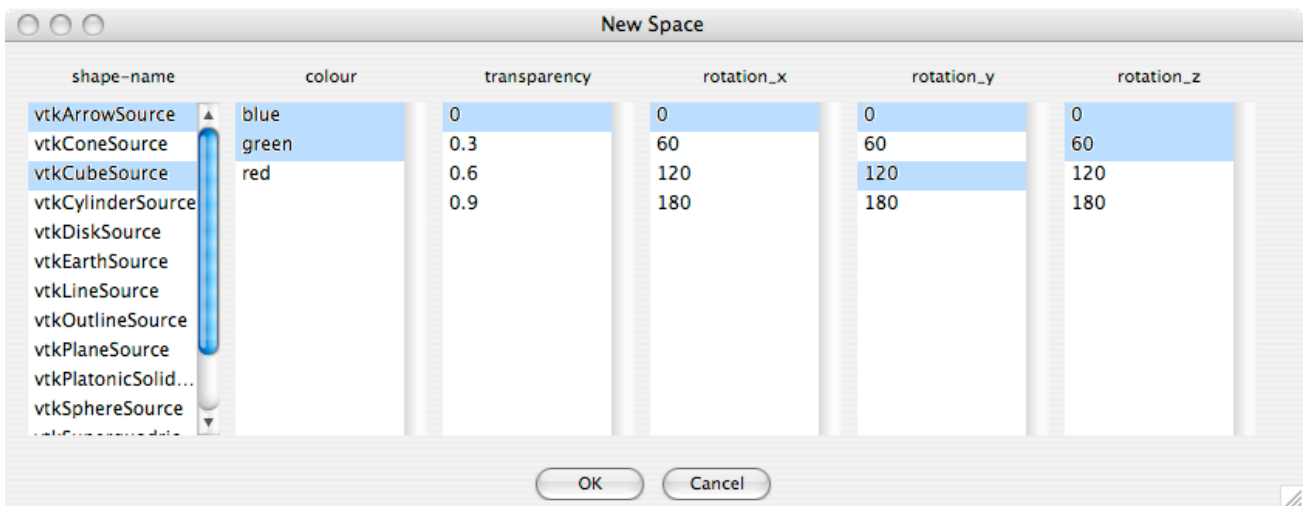


Figure 9. A close up of the New Space dialogue obtained if the upper left and lower right images from Figure 8 are selected.

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