Color Tunneling: Interactive Exploration and Selection in Volumetric Datasets
Christophe Hurter, A. R. Taylor, Sheelagh Carpendale, Alexandru Telea

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Abstract
Interactive data exploration and manipulation are often hindered by dataset sizes. For 3D data, this is aggravated by occlusion, important adjacencies, and entangled patterns. Such challenges make visual interac-
tion via common filtering techniques hard. We describe a set of real-
time multi-dimensional data deformation techniques that aim to help
users to easily select, analyze, and eliminate spatial-and-data patterns.
Our techniques allow animation between view configurations, semantic
filtering and view deformation. Any data subset can be selected at
any step along the animation. Data can be filtered and deformed to
reduce occlusion and ease complex data selections. Our techniques are
simple to learn and implement, flexible, and real-time interactive with
datasets of tens of millions of data points. We demonstrate our tech-
niques on three domain areas: 2D image segmentation and manipula-
tion, 3D medical volume exploration, and astrophysical exploration.

Index Terms: I.3.6 [Methodology and Techniques]: Interaction
techniques—

1 Introduction
Volumetric datasets are found in many fields of science, such as engi-
neering, material sciences, medical imaging, and astrophysics. One of
the most used visualization methods for such datasets is direct volume
rendering (DVR), which can show all values in the dataset. In contrast,
techniques such as isosurfaces or slicing focus on data subsets, which
requires users to select a priori the structures of interest.

Although DVR does not require an a priori selection step, it also
comes with one major challenge: occlusion. On two-dimensional dis-
play devices, one cannot see more than a single data value per pixel.
Yet, there are typically tens, or even hundreds, of such data values along
each view ray centered at such a pixel. Hence, discovering patterns of
interest hidden inside the data volume can be challenging.

Apart from a priori selection of structures of interest, several tech-
niques have been proposed for exploring 3D data volumes. Transfer
functions map values along a view ray to RGBA components which
are next combined to convey an aggregated insight at each screen pixel.
However, to make deep-hidden patterns visible in the final 2D image,
transfer functions require careful, and often non-trivial settings. Inter-
active focus-plus-context (F+C) techniques offer an alternative by al-
lowing users to locally manipulate the geometry and/or appearance of
the data volume in order to ‘peek’ inside it, while keeping the overall
spatial context of the entire volume.

In this paper, we extend F+C interactive exploration of 2D and 3D
datasets in several directions. We propose a set of linked views that
display subsets of data attributes. Example views are 3D DVR plots, 2D
scatterplots, and 2D and 3D histograms. Views are linked by brushing
and free-form selection. Using the optimal view(s), one can find struc-
tures of interest, e.g., spatially compact zones in DVR renderings or
peaks in histograms, and highlight or erase such structures in all views
at once. We enhance classical histogram views with shading, sorting,
and depth, to allow spotting complex patterns with greater ease. We
propose a smooth animation between multiple views, to locate (and se-
lect) data patterns which are hard to isolate in static plots. We integrate
a F+C deformation that adds the ability to uncover locally occluded
spatial patterns in our views. We present a GPU implementation of our
techniques, which we call color tunneling, that creates real-time inter-
active, animated, explorations of datasets of tens of millions of points
on a modern PC. We illustrate color tunneling with examples on 2D im-
age editing, 3D medical visualization, and astrophysics visualization.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents related work
in volume F+C exploration. Section 3 outlines our design. Section 4
details the proposed interactive exploration-and-selection techniques:
view linking, warp animation, lock, brush, and dig. Section 5 presents
two applications. Section 6 details the implementation. Section 7 dis-
cusses our F+C technique. Finally, Sec. 7.1 concludes the paper.

2 Related Work
Occlusion is an inherent problem in 3D volume visualization. Several
types of techniques alleviate this problem and help users to locate
and/or select structures of interest from 3D data volumes, as follows.

Magic lenses: Magic Lenses locally modify a screen area by user-
selected operators to change the appearance of shapes [3]. The idea
was extended for complex effect compositing and interactive lens
parameter editing [2]. Tangible magic lenses extend the base concept
to slice through, or zoom in, layered 2D or 3D datasets by interactively
moving a 3D tracked physical planar object (the lens) which is either
rigid [32] or flexible [22]. Nonlinear projection deforms 3D scenes
in image space, as if seen through a cylindrical or spherical lens [40].

Semantic lenses, focus + context, and deformation: The ‘dust &
magnet’ tool declutters scatterplots by several data-attribute-driven
magnets in screen space [41]. Niels et al. visualize ship motions on
a map by blending trajectories into smoothly shaded shapes [36]. They
highlight specific trajectories by a semantic lens that works on the
shading values, but does no deformation, as positions are found too
important to be altered. For large datasets, deformation techniques locally
change the spatial data layout to give more space to important data
elements. Many variations of the original fisheye view [14] exist, e.g.,
Elastic Presentation [5], Sigma Lenses [26], and Jelly Lenses [27].
The table lens locally distorts the Cartesian layout of cells in a data
table to give more space to specific table rows or columns [29]. For node-link
layouts, techniques include edge deformations, e.g., EdgeLens [39],
bring-neighbors lens [34], edge plucking [38, 37], and link sliding and
‘bring & go’ techniques [34, 15] and their generalizations [30]. The
MoleView technique deforms data based on both spatial position and
data values, allowing to ‘dig’ in hidden data layers [18]. Histomages
links two element-based plots (images and their histograms) to allow
an easier selection and editing of features in the 2D or color space [6].

Occlusion challenge: In volume datasets, occlusion is typically larger
than in the above examples. If position has specific semantics, it should
be carefully preserved. Several F+C techniques refine the above inter-
action principles for this context. A viewer-aligned radial warping of
elements close to the focus is used to push data points away in 2.5D [4],
BalloonProbe uses the same radial warp idea for elements close to a focus in 3D synthetic scenes [12]. For 3D medical scans, complex manipulations (cut, peel, ply, dilate, retract) are used to expose inner structures [10], with optional animation [23]. Similar techniques are provided by GmIenses for segmented mesh datasets [28]. Illustrative F+C techniques are further generalized in [11]. Multiple foci help to selectively enhance specific structures [17]. A detailed taxonomy of F+C techniques for volume data is given in [8].

**Transfer functions:** Identification and selection of features of interest in volumetric data is also supported by transfer functions. Essentially, these are mappings from subsets of the attribute domain to specific color and transparency values. Kniss et al. extend classical 1D and 2D transfer functions to higher dimensions in order to easier find and isolate structures of interest in volumetric data [20]. Conceptually, transfer functions propose a different way for feature isolation than F+C techniques: While the latter rely chiefly on brushing to select such features, transfer functions require the (careful) design of a data-to-appearance mapping for the same task. Although the design of this mapping can be significantly assisted by automatic data analysis [9, 31, 25], or direct WSYWIG interaction [16], their specification still involves considerable user effort.

Overall, basic F+C deformation techniques are simple to use and learn, but are hard to control in terms of what gets deformed and what does not. More complex techniques achieve better control, but also require more complex interaction tools. We next present a way to reconcile the simplicity of the former techniques with the flexibility of the latter, by combining linked views, interaction, and animation.

## 3 Principle

Our principle, called **color tunneling**, is a set of interactive techniques that expand the possibilities for selection and exploration of images and volume datasets, while avoiding the use of complex menus and interface components. We provide support for a rich spectrum of exploratory activities via the integration of animation and brushing.

Our input data is a uniformly sampled multivariate field \( F : D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^m \), \( V \subset \mathbb{R}^n \). For simplicity, our examples consider \( n = 2 \) (images) and \( n = 3 \) (volumes). As data attributes \( V \) we consider RGB color (for images) and scalar data values, data gradients, and volumetric shading for volumes (i.e. the color of voxels as assigned by whichever DVR method was chosen). We use next the term **data points** to refer to voxels \( (n = 3) \) or pixels \( (n = 2) \). However, color tunneling works directly for higher dimensions and/or more attributes.

Given such a field \( F \), we consider two types of views to show all data points in \( F \): Scatterplot views map 2 or 3 dimensions or attributes in \( D \cup V \) to \( \mathbb{R}^2 \) or \( \mathbb{R}^3 \) respectively, and additional attributes in \( V \) to color. For instance, a DVR of \( F \) maps \( D \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^2 \), and scalars \( v \in V \) to color. 2D histograms map one attribute \( v \in V \) to the \( x \) axis and the number of points in \( D \) having values \( y = s \) to the \( y \) axis. Fig. 1 shows such a DVR and a density histogram view for a 3D CT scan. Key to exploring \( F \) is the linking of such views by interaction and animation. A typical scenario goes as follows: The user creates a view which shows three dimensions of \( D \), e.g. a DVR of \( F \). Usually, such a view occludes interesting structures found deep inside \( F \). Next, the user creates one or more scatterplot or histogram views by selecting combinations of dimensions and attributes of interest. Finally, the user employs interactive techniques to explore the data and isolate structures of interest: view linking, brush, warp, dig. These techniques are detailed next.

## 4 Interaction Techniques

Since we are exploring dense multivariate datasets which exhibit significant overlap between groups of voxels or pixels, we need tools to interactively unveil the occluded structures of interest. For this, we propose five interactive techniques as follows:

- **View linking:** Three configurable views (2 exploration views and one lock view) for data exploration (Sec. 4.1),
- **Warp:** Animates a view between two configurations (Sec. 4.2),
- **Lock:** Locks items not to be affected by brush or dig (Sec. 4.3),
- **Brush:** With the lock view, brushing allows adding or removing data in a view (Sec. 4.4),
- **Dig:** With the lock view, digging pushes data points away from the lens center to unveil occluded structures (Sec. 4.5).

![Figure 1: Two exploration views to perform data exploration and a lock view to configure the brushing and dig techniques.](image-url)
4.3 Lock

This view allows specifying data points not to be affected by the brush or the dig tool. Lock can be done at the start or during an animation (Sec. 4.2). We use a ‘lock brush’ (Fig. 1) with or the dig tool. Lock can be done at the start or during an animation to choose a suitable visual configuration (Sec. 4.2).

4.4 Filtering brush

Data points can be removed if they are uninteresting and/or to reduce clutter. For this, we use a filtering brush combined with locking (Sec. 4.3). As for the lock tool, we can remove points in the filtering brush (with the Ctrl key), add back points which fall in the brush but were removed earlier (using the Shift key), and control the filtering brush size by the mouse wheel. In remove mode, only locked points are affected by the filtering brush. Fig. 2 shows this. Here, we first lock all points having a high density value (removal of low density values in the lock view). Using next the filtering brush in removal mode eliminates only low-density data points. This unveils the skull structure. Conversely, using the filtering brush in add mode, adds only unlocked data points. If we first lock both low and high-density values (using the removal brush on the average-density values in the lock view), only average-density brushed items are added. In our example, this restores the skin (Fig. 2, brush add).

4.5 Dig

To further alleviate occlusion, we propose a dig tool. Digging smoothly pushes data points from a focus point (mouse pointer) away in radial direction. The dig radius is controlled by the mouse wheel.

Conceptually, our dig tool is a 3D version of the MoleView principle [18]: Given a focus point \( x \in \mathbb{R}^2 \), and a radius \( r \in \mathbb{R}^+ \), when the user presses the mouse button, we compute, for each point \( p \) whose screen projection falls in the disk \( \mathcal{C} \) of radius \( r \) centered at \( x \), a displacement \( \mathbf{p}_{\text{disp}} = \mathbf{v} / ||\mathbf{v}|| \). Here, \( \mathbf{v} = p - x - ((p - x) \cdot \mathbf{n})\mathbf{n} \) is the shortest vector from the view ray passing through \( x \) towards \( p \), and \( \mathbf{n} \) is the view plane normal. While the mouse button stays pressed, we interpolate \( p \) towards \( \mathbf{p}_{\text{disp}} \), for all \( p \in \mathcal{C} \), i.e. compute \( p(t) = (1 - t)p + t\mathbf{p}_{\text{disp}} \) for \( t \in [0, 1] \), using 50–100 time steps. Upon button release, we do the inverse interpolation from the displaced position \( p(1) \) towards the original location \( p \), i.e. let points snap back to their locations. Points close to the focus \( x \) will quickly drift towards the focus boundary \( \partial\mathcal{C} \); points close to \( \partial\mathcal{C} \) move slower towards it. This creates a clear gap around \( x \) and a progressively weaker deformation towards \( \partial\mathcal{C} \).

The dig tool helps exploring the dataset by unveiling structures hidden by the pushed items. Also, the dig tool can be used to forecast the effect of further brushing actions: The pushed items are the unlocked ones, and thus will be affected by subsequent brushing.

5 Applications

Below we illustrate the application of color tunneling on several 2D and 3D datasets from various application domains.

5.1 Medical imaging

Consider the 3D scans in Fig. 2 (128×256×256 voxels) and in the video and Fig. 3 (128×128×112 voxels). We want to “peek” inside the head to see the skull structure. For this, we first create a tissue-density histogram view and color its points by the DVR values given by gradient shading. The tall histogram peak indicates the largest voxel count in the volume, which are soft-tissue voxels. To the left of this peak, we see pink histogram points. These correspond to the skin, which has the same color in the DVR view. In the middle of the peak, we see a thin dark vertical band. These are low-gradient voxels, which matches the fact that there are no density interfaces in soft tissue. In contrast, the pink histogram points are bright, which matches the DVR highlights at the skin-air and skin-soft tissue interfaces. Now that we understand the meaning of the histogram points, we select and lock all histogram points, and next select and unlock all (pink) points to the left of the peak. Finally, we apply the dig effect to the DVR view (Fig. 2 dig). This pushes unlocked voxels away from the focus, and reveals the hidden skull structure inside (gray).

Fig. 4 shows a second scenario. Here, we want to expose the top part of the brain structure in our head scan. Simple filtering cannot easily achieve this. The human head in this scan consists of a succession of layers with non-monotonic density values (low for skin, high for bone,

Figure 2: Brush, dig, and lock tools. Locked items are not affected by brush and dig. We used transfer functions to make air voxels transparent and standard gradient shading. We see that the head is surrounded by a large amount of uninteresting noise (yellow).
and low again for the deeply-nested brain structure). Simply filtering out the bones will not help to display the brain since the skin will not be filtered and will occlude it. Conversely, filtering on the skin density will also remove the brain which has a similar density value.

To solve our task, we use color tunneling. First, we use a density histogram view and erase the noise (low density) and bone (highest density) values (Fig. 4 a). Next, we create a 2D scatterplot of the $z$ value of the density gradient vs the $x$ gradient value, and use the warp tool to animate between the 3D DVR and this scatterplot (Fig. 4 b). Warping a few times back and forth, we see that the top-part of the brain is warped to the top-half of the 2D scatterplot. This matches the fact that, in this area, $z$ density gradients are large. We now remove the brain lower part by erasing the scatterplot's lower half (Fig. 4 b, right image). However, this also erases some skin parts. To get these back, we use the density histogram view to unlock points in the skin density range (Fig. 4 c, left). Finally, we use the add brush in the DVR view to paint back the skin voxels in the damaged areas (Fig. 4 c, middle).

Since only soft-density voxels are unlocked for editing, and we brush only over skin areas, only skin voxels get affected; bone or noise voxels are not painted back. Fig. 4 c (right) shows the final result.

5.2 Astrophysical data

We next consider a 3D cube of astrophysical measurements of the large-scale structure of hydrogen gas intensities in our Milky Way Galaxy ($1024 \times 1024 \times 160$ 16-bit integer voxels, 320 MB total) [33]. The $x$ and $y$ axes map polar sky coordinates, and $z$ maps radiation wavelength, which translates to distance through the Galaxy along ray paths. Color maps gas intensity. Fig. 5 a shows our data cube, rendered with DVR.

In this view, astrophysicists using our tool, and who provided the feedback outlined in this section, could only see color layers that indicate regions of denser hydrogen gas from the spiral arms of the Milky Way, such as the prominent yellow slab spread over a large part of the $xy$ subspace. These are regions of the Galaxy where the cycles of star birth and death play out. We now choose a scatterplot of intensity vs wavelength (Fig. 5 d). This shows two interesting phenomena. First, we see a thin compact horizontal black bar, not visible in the initial data cube. This tells that the respective intensity is present in all wavelengths. Secondly, we notice a white gap in the intensity-wavelength space, above the black bar at the distance of the bright spiral arm (Fig. 5 d, red marker). This tells that, for the respective wavelengths, there exist only high (purple..yellow) intensities, but no intermediate (blue..green) intensities. This situation does not occur for any other wavelengths, as there is a single such gap in the scatterplot. We now warp the scatterplot towards the original data cube. The intermediate frames (Fig. 5 b,c) show that the gap corresponds to the spatial region marked in red in Fig. 5 a, right inside the yellow wavelength band. This lack of low intensities at the location of the spiral arm shows an absence of low density hydrogen in this region. Some phenomena may have swept up the gas into high density structure, a step on the way to forming new stars.

Fig. 6 shows a second scenario. In the DVR image, we notice a few constant-intensity lines parallel with the wavelength ($z$) axis (Fig. 6 a). Such lines are created by radiation from objects in the far universe being absorbed by gas in our Milky Way. The properties of these lines can be used to measure the Galaxy temperature. We would like to select such lines for closer analysis. Doing this via spatial or value-range filtering is hard, since the lines are embedded in surrounding data, and also do not have a perfectly constant intensity. Also, we would like to find if similar lines exist deeper in the data cube.

We can select these lines as follows. First, we build a histogram of the intensity gradients of our data points. Gradient is a good detector for the boundaries of these lines, as intensity rapidly changes between the relative constant value inside lines and varying values outside. We next sort histogram points vertically based on their intensity value, and order them in depth with high-intensity voxels first. Fig. 6 e shows the result. We see that relatively few voxels have high gradients, while the vast majority of the data is represented by a well defined distribution of gradients. Our lines of interest are located in the former voxels (histogram tail). Also, we see several color bands in the smooth part of the histogram, with a thin purple (high-intensity value) band at the top, and most points having low values (green). Such bands emerge because of our $y$ sorting on intensity. This distribution reveals the kinematics of the Galaxy and the velocity structure of the gas, represented by gradients in intensity with wavelength.

Over the high-gradient tail, we mainly see the same green shade as on the lines in Fig. 6 a. This indicates that for these high gradients, points do not have high intensity values (purple). Our lines of interest thus occupy regions of low intensity values and high gradient.

To find our desired lines, we now warp between the histogram and DVR views. In the intermediate frames (Figs. 6 b-d), we see several horizontal lines appearing, which smoothly move from the histogram tail towards their spatial locations in the DVR view. To select all such lines, we thus simply select the histogram tail. For more control, we can use the transition views to select any desired line located at specific spatial positions. The animation unveils several additional such lines inside the data cube, which the DVR view (Fig. 6 a) did not show.

5.3 Image segmentation and manipulation

We next illustrate color tunneling for three use-cases for 2D images, presented in increasing order of complexity.

Dead pixel isolation: Consider a 2D color photograph, shown as a Cartesian plot (Fig. 7 left). Photos often contain isolated pixel groups whose color slightly differs from their surroundings, such as dead pixels due to imperfections of digital cameras. Isolating such pixels (e.g. for retouching) is hard: They are visible neither in Cartesian nor in hue-saturation plots (Fig. 7 right). However, if we
warp between the two plots, such pixels clearly show up as outliers (Fig. 7 middle frame). Why does our animation highlight such outliers? The explanation is as follows. Similar-color compact spatial regions in the Cartesian plot, e.g., the uniform image background or the orange fish, move as compact blocks to their corresponding regions in the hue-saturation plot. Outlier pixels in such regions have different hue and/or saturation values, so are warped on different trajectories. In our case, these are pixels on the dark image background, whose color slightly differs from their uniform vicinity. We can stop the animation at any frame showing such pixels to select them for e.g. retouching.

**Complex selections:** Consider an input image (Fig. 8 a), where we want to select and remove the indicated wavy colorband. Selecting this area in image-space is hard, as its shape and color distribution are quite complex. We use instead a mix of erase and warp, as follows. First, we use a hue-saturation scatterplot to select the band. Figs. 8 g–j show the brushing of the desired pixels in the histogram view. A dotted curve shows the brush trajectory. Directly erasing this selection also eliminates several pixels outside the desired band (Figs. 8 b–e). To correct this too small area selection, we use the warp tool. Figs. 8 k–n show several frames from warping the result of our previous erase (Figs. 8 e) towards a hue-saturation plot. During the warp, our band is shifted away from its spatial position. This provides precisely the extra empty space around the undesired selections, which we can now cancel by direct brushing in the warped frame (Fig. 8 m, mouse positions). Fig. 8 n shows the warped frame after removal of the undesired selections. Fig. 8 p shows the final image, with the initial colorband precisely removed. The editing took around one minute. We also tried to isolate this color band using classical fuzzy brushing in the Graphic Converter editor [21]. To achieve the selection quality in Fig. 8 p, an expert user of this tool needed several trial-and-error passes (6 minutes). Note also that selecting these pixels using only brushing in the hue-saturation plot is equally hard: Fig. 8 o shows this plot after the unwanted selection correction was done using warping (Figs. 8 m–n). Comparing this image with the hue-saturation plot before warp editing (Fig. 8 j), we see no visible difference. Thus, the warp helped indeed to correct the selection in a way that is not possible using only the hue-saturation plot.

**Image segmentation:** Fig. 9 (a) shows a skin scan of a naevus, or mole, acquired with a Handyscope optical dermatoscope (2448 × 3264 pixels). Dermatology specialists need to segment such scans into normal skin, the mole, and the internal mole structure [7, 24], prior to applying various metrics [13] to predict the potential malignity of the mole, i.e., its chance to become a melanoma. A manual segmentation produced by a dermatologist, shown in image (a), takes a few minutes to complete, depending on training level and image complexity. Processing many such images, e.g., during routine clinical screening, is time-consuming and tedious. Automatic segmentation yields in general suboptimal results, given the high variability of tumor morphologies and color ranges. Moreover, medical users typically desire to closely control of the segmentation process. Color tunneling can help this process. Image (b) shows a hue-saturation polar plot of our scan. Here, a simple selection in the mid-saturation range captures well both the inner-structure and mole-skin boundaries. Indeed, for mole images of white-skin subjects, boundaries have a saturation located between the pale (desaturated) skin and mole (saturated) colors. The brush thickness controls the allowed boundary fuzziness – thicker brushes allow selecting fuzzier boundaries. Warping this image towards a gradient magnitude vs brightness plot shows how our selection splits into two clusters (images (d–f)). To map these clusters to spatial locations, the user next warps the gradient-brightness plot towards the initial Cartesian plot (images (g–i)). Playing this animation a few times, the user sees that the upper and lower clusters encode the mole-skin boundary and inner-structure boundaries respectively, which have (on average) different brightnesses. This justifies the use of a brightness plot axis. To separately select these two boundaries, the user erases the undesired cluster from the gradient-brightness plot (images (j,k) and (l,m)). Additionally, for noisy images, the user can erase high-gradient points (the
Figure 7: Dead pixel isolation. Warping between an image (left) and its hue-saturation plot (right) allows finding a few outlier pixels (marked red).

Figure 9: Skin tumor segmentation scenario.

tops of the cluster bumps) to make the selection more robust. This justifies the use of a gradient plot axis. Finally, to select the entire inner structure, the user animates a few times between the gradient-brightness and Cartesian plots, and notices that the desired structure corresponds to the ‘tail’ of the scatterplot in an intermediate frame (images (n,o)). To select this structure, the user first erases a few outlier pixels (image (n)), and then adds the tail shape to the selection (image (o)). Image (p) shows the successful selection of the inner structure. Note, for both the skin-mole and internal-structure boundaries, the similarity with the manual segmentations.

The above scenario was executed by an experienced dermatologist (11 years of clinical practice) after 15 minutes of pre-training using our tool, and successfully tried out on several dermatoscopic images of different types of naevi morphologies, with resolutions from $600^2$ to $2448 \times 3264$ pixels. The user noted that, while color tunneling is not significantly faster than manual segmentation for clearly delimited naevi, it is faster and easier to use than manual segmentation on images exhibiting fuzzy complex boundaries or acquisition noise (around 2 minutes/image). In particular, the user found selecting entire regions with just a few brush strokes and animation moves to be much easier (and requiring less concentration) with color tunneling than using classical encircle-and-flood-fill operations. The user also commented that adding new scatterplot types, e.g. image local smoothness/contrast vs hue, could make color tunneling a valuable tool for selecting and analyzing specific diagnostic factors for skin tumors. Given this positive feedback, we aim to explore this direction in future work.

6 IMPLEMENTATION

Interactivity is key to our proposal. For datasets of 100K elements, brushing and warping can be implemented at interactive framerates in the standard OpenGL pipeline [18, 6]. Our datasets are up to two orders of magnitude larger, e.g. 3D volumetric scans of 512$^3$ voxels.

Even if modern GPUs can render 10 Mpixels/second, interacting with such data sizes is not trivial. We need to update in real time both selection state (for brushing) and point positions (for digging). We next detail how these operations can be efficiently done using pixel and vertex shaders. In a vertex shader, we can change the position of the drawn element, and thus achieve the digging effect. One challenging aspect for warping is writing the updated element positions. Shaders were designed to write to textures, not to arbitrary buffers. Render-to-texture is accurate but requires a complex implementation and extra writing and reading passes. Recently, OpenGL added transform feedback, a feature that allows vertex shaders to write to arbitrary buffers. We heavily rely on this feature, using a two-step process: First, position data is processed to account for both brushing (element selection) and warping (element displacement). Secondly, processed data is copied back into the rendering pipeline for the next brushing or warp step. This is more efficient than render-to-texture since it does not require texture I/O. Also, all data stays on the GPU, which gives an additional speed boost. Apart from the above, the implementation of color tunneling is straightforward. Only point primitives are used for rendering. Shading is freely specifiable on a per-point basis.

We implemented color tunneling using the transform feedback technique with OpenGL 4.1 and C#. For completeness, we also added classical range-based attribute selection by GUI sliders to our tool. The obtained rendering performance is one to two orders of magnitude larger than using render-to-texture [19] or dired model rendering [18]. On a Core-i7 3.4 GHz with a GeForce GTX 580, this allows us to manipulate datasets of over 10M elements at 20 frames/second.
of existing multivariate data exploration techniques.

Animations can be stopped at any stage. Each static view is a result of a specific animation stage, where one can explore, brush, and select data. Thus, our animation serves as a flexible, as it allows fine-grained, discontinuous, selections. In contrast to MoleView, which works purely in 2D, and to other isotropic 3D F+C techniques [12], we move points in the brush radially away from the view-ray. This creates an empty cylinder around the 2D focus point (Fig. 3), and makes our dig tool work without having to specify a focus point in 3D.

Selection space: Histomages [6] also allows selecting data in linked views. However, only pairs of static views (2D Cartesian plot and its histogram) are offered. We allow selection in an automatically generated continuum of views, created by warping between pairs of user-configured views. Animations can be stopped at any stage. Each such stage is a static intermediate view where one can explore, brush, and select data. Thus, our animation serves also the task of data exploration and selection, besides the goal of mental map preservation covered by earlier work. In contrast to ‘semantic layers’ [23], our data selection is much simpler, but equally powerful, as we use only 2D brushing instead of a complex family of 3D widgets and GUI sliders.

Scope: Several of the selection and exploration use-cases presented here are also targeted by existing techniques such as F+C deformations, range sliders, and transfer functions. However, we argue that color tunneling makes these use-cases simpler to address. As such, we see color tunneling as a complement, and not a replacement, of the rich set of existing multivariate data exploration techniques.

Scalability: All our views are essentially point-based plots. Our plot implementation using OpenGL's transform feedback allows achieving interactive frame rates for over 10M points. In contrast, earlier related techniques [18, 6, 17, 11, 8] propose more complex deformation and rendering implementations, which cannot achieve this scalability.

Extensions: Color tunneling can be extended in several directions. For instance, fuzzy selections can be easily added, e.g. by rendering points with an alpha value based on their distance to the 2D selection brush center. This would expose the selection confidence in all views. Additionally, multiple selections can be easily added.

Limitations: Point-based rendering creates sampling artifacts, see e.g. the small-scale skin ripples in Fig. 4. Such artifacts are small, and exist only for a few frames of the dig animation (see video). They can be removed by computing a dense sampling of the space $D$ by backtracing the dig deformation field [17]. However, this is expensive (minutes or more), and would decrease our frame rate prohibitively. Separately, we note that better mechanisms to select the relevant exploration views are needed, especially for high-dimensional datasets, apart from the trial-and-error procedure described here. Finally, we note that formal broad user studies are needed to confirm the early usability results of color tunneling outlined by our studies presented in Secs. 5.2 and 5.3.

7.1 Conclusions

We have presented color tunneling, a set of interactive techniques for exploration and selection of structures from multidimensional datasets. Color tunneling combines simple operations: linked views, lock, dig, brush, and warp animation. Together, these operations, which are invoked by simple mouse-based brushing and clicking, without using any complex menus or other user-interface elements, support a rich spectrum of exploratory activities in volume datasets.

In contrast to previous animation techniques [18, 6], users can control and stop the animation at any stage. This yields an infinite set...
of in-between views where one can brush, dig, select, and explore the data. We thus use animation as an exploration tool rather than only for preserving the mental-map between two views. We illustrate this by animations of 3D cube to scatterplot (Sec. 5.1), scatterplot to scatterplot (Sec. 5.3), 3D cube to histogram (Secs. 5.1, 5.2) and 3D cube to 3D cube (Sec. 5.2). We also present a new interaction tool: the lock view. Locked items are not affected by our dig, warp and brush tools. Locking leverages brushing by allowing complex selections of brushable items, in contrast to brushing compact ranges [19, 35]. Concluding, our contributions are as follows:

- using animation as a controlled data exploration-and-selection technique,
- improved brushing with a flexible selection of brushable items,
- improved dig tool (lens deformation) with a flexible selection of pushable items,
- a simple implementation able to handle over 10M displayed data points at a frame rate of 20 images per second on a modern GPU.

Many applications and extensions of color tunneling are possible. Color tunneling is directly applicable to other high-variate datasets, e.g. CFD and geophysical data. The technique can be valuable for exploring dense scatterplots created by multidimensional scaling (MDS), in particular for explaining the meaning of point clusters in such projections. Finally, computing interpolation paths between arbitrary pairs of element-based plots so that structures and patterns are optimally highlighted is a promising future work direction.

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