

From Theory to Practice

Workshop Proposal by Stephen Few



[Interface mock-ups for an Excel add-in product named Chart Tamer currently being developed]

Three years ago I learned that Microsoft was replacing the charting engine in its Office suite of products. Being intimately familiar with the limitations and problems that existed in Excel's charts, I was excited to hear this news and immediately contacted the person in charge at Microsoft to offer assistance in the form of free advice—simple changes that could be made to dramatically improve the Excel's visualization capabilities. My offer was graciously accepted, so I submitted a few pages of practical recommendations, and then waited several months to see the results. Later, when I finally glimpsed Microsoft Office 2007 for the first time, my hopes were dashed. Nothing that I recommended had been included, despite being assured by Microsoft that I would be pleased with the new charts. I responded by deciding then and there to design an inexpensive add-in product for Excel to make the improvements that Microsoft failed to address available to the millions of users who needed them. This product is currently being developed by Bonavista Systems, the makers a popular and useful Excel add-in product named MicroCharts.

Chart Tamer will do the following:

- Limit the library of chart types to those that really work, thereby reducing the complexity of choosing an appropriate chart for your purpose
- Add useful charts that aren't currently available: box plots and dot plots
- Revise the formatting defaults of charts to present data more simply and clearly
- Restrict chart formatting options to those that are effective
- Revise the color palette to encourage the use of colors that display data effectively
- Provide a simple new interface for selecting the appropriate chart type, which will guide you to the right selection without people down in a multi-screen wizard

In my presentation, I'll describe the journey that I've taken, starting with the problems that I wanted to solve and continuing through the design choices that I and others have made to address them effectively, within constraints that are built into Excel.