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Challenges for industrial-strength Information Retrieval on Databases

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ABSTRACT

Implementing keyword search and other IR tasks on top of relational engines has become viable in practice, especially thanks to high-performance column-store technology. Supporting complex combinations of structured and unstructured search in real-world heterogeneous data spaces however requires more than “just” IR-on-DB. In this work, we walk the reader through our industrial-strength solution to this challenge and its application to a real-world scenario. By treating structured and unstructured search as first-class citizens of the same computational platform, much of the integration effort is pushed from the application level down to the data-management level. Combined with a visual design environment, this allows to model complex search engines without a need for programming.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing demand for solving complex search tasks in heterogeneous data spaces, such as enterprise search [9], expert finding [7, 2], recommendation [3]. These types of tasks require unstructured as well as structured search. We argue that by implementing information retrieval on a database it becomes easier to support complex search tasks. Already in 1981, Crawford suggested in [6] that using standard query languages and proven relational calculus: eases engineering; ensures repeatability of results across systems; enables data-independence in text search algorithms; allows search applications to benefit “for free” from any advances in the database engine. In more recent years, [5] and [10] emphasized these benefits and showed that relational technology can compete, performance-wise, with specialized data structures, especially when implemented in modern column-store engines optimized for online analytical processing (OLAP) work-loads.

In this paper we describe the challenges identified by Spinque, a spin-off company from CWI Amsterdam, as it converted exciting results from research into industrial-strength complex search solutions. We illustrate our approach on a simplified as well as a real-world use case.

2. REAL-WORLD IR-on-DB

This section describes the challenges for a unified approach to structured and unstructured search and Spinque’s solution to these challenges:

1. efficient database implementation of IR tasks to search unstructured data;
2. a flexible data model to accommodate queries over any type of structured data;
3. a mechanism to compute and propagate partial scores consistently over unstructured and structured data;
4. an abstraction layer to model complex tasks easily.

The “toy” scenario. In the reminder of this section, let us use the following running example: to perform keyword search on a product database, but only consider the description section of products in the category “toy”.

2.1 Keyword search in MonetDB/SQL

The core of keyword search implementations is fast lookup of query term occurrences within text documents. Inverted index structures [14, 4] are used to map each term to its “posting list” – the positions at which it appears in a collection of text “documents”. Terms occurrences are then used to build the statistical data employed by the ranking algorithm of choice.

An inverted index can be easily implemented with any relational DBMS. As shown in Figure 1, term lookup requires an inner join on terms between a table containing query terms and a table containing term occurrences. The ability to create such index structures on-demand is crucial to support scenarios where keyword search is part of more complex tasks, because their parameters (e.g. stemming language) are often hard to decide upfront. Data fed to our system undergoes almost no pre-processing, so that the original text can be ranked at any time by e.g. custom distance functions, tokenization strategies, stemming choices. The only additions needed to MonetDB to support on-demand indexing were two user-defined functions to implement a text tokenizer and Snowball stemmers for several languages.
(a) Inverted index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>term</th>
<th>posting-list</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>book</td>
<td>(3,23),(10,55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cake</td>
<td>(10,51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>history</td>
<td>(3,19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) Inverted index as a relational join on term

Figure 1: Term look-up

Let us assume that the toy scenario introduced in Section 2 has already been partially solved, so that a table (productID int, description string) provides us with pairs of “toy” products and their description, and products have to be ranked according to the relevance of their description to the query keywords. We show how Okapi BM25 ranking function can be implemented in MonetDB/SQIL. The following query turns a generic (docID int, data string) table into the equivalent of a term-doc matrix:

```
CREATE VIEW doc_len AS
SELECT docID, count(*) as len
FROM tokenize((SELECT data FROM docs));
```

From this doc-term matrix we can produce some simple counts and a term dictionary:

```
CREATE VIEW tf AS
SELECT docID, count(*) as tf
FROM doc_len GROUP BY docID;
```

```
CREATE VIEW termdict AS
SELECT row_number() over() as termID, terms.term
FROM (SELECT DISTINCT term FROM term_doc) AS terms;
```

```
CREATE VIEW docs AS
SELECT docID, count(*) as docLen
FROM tokenize((SELECT data FROM docs)) AS qt, termdict
WHERE stem(lcase(qt.token), 'sb-english') = termdict.term;
```

```
CREATE VIEW qterms AS
SELECT termID, log((SELECT count(*) FROM doc_len) - count(*) + 0.5) as idf
FROM termdict, qterms
WHERE termdict.termID = qterms.termID
GROUP BY tf_bm25.docID;
```

```
CREATE VIEW tf_bm25 AS
SELECT tf_bm25.docID, sum(tf_bm25.tf) as score
FROM tf_bm25, idf, qterms
WHERE tf_bm25.termID = qterms.termID
AND idf.termID = qterms.termID
GROUP BY tf_bm25.docID;
```

Finally, the tf-idf contributions of all query terms are summed up to define the relevance score of each document:

```
SELECT tf_bm25.docID, sum(tf_bm25.tf) as score
FROM tf_bm25, idf, qterms
WHERE tf_bm25.termID = qterms.termID
AND idf.termID = qterms.termID
GROUP BY tf_bm25.docID;
```

Most alternative ranking functions would easily adapt or reuse large parts of this implementation. Also, most of the SQL queries above are independent of query-terms, which allows to materialize intermediate results for reuse in different search scenarios on the same data. While beating specialized text retrieval systems on raw speed is not the focus of this study, reaching reasonable performance is a requirement for the development of real search solutions. In accordance with [5, 10], we can report runtime performance in the range of 20ms (hot data) for 3-term queries against a 2.3GB collection of raw text (1.1M documents), on a standard Linux desktop machine (8-core, Intel i7-3770S, 3.10GHz, 16GB RAM, 256GB SSD), using MonetDB v11.23.14.

2.2 Flexible data model

Relational tables can store and query structured data efficiently, but they are not particularly application-friendly: the schema of each table must be known by applications using them, but the optimal schema depends on the data at hand. Triple-stores can offer a valid alternative.

Semantic triples are best known in the Semantic Web community as the atomic data unit in the RDF data model. Triples encode statements about resources, in the form of (subject,property,object), and a collection of such statements can be interpreted as a graph. Triple-stores are (mostly relational) database systems specifically designed to store and manipulate this special kind of 3-column tables (or 4, when managing quadruples for named graphs), although any relational DBMS would also serve the purpose. In fact, we use the standard SQL interface of MonetDB to implement and query a triple-store, with an important customization that we describe in Section 2.3. One direct advantage of using a standard SQL interface is that it allows to exploit the strengths of both triples and standard tables.

For the toy scenario of Section 2, the docs table to be provided as input for keyword search (see Section 2.1) can be generated at query time by the following SQL view:

```
CREATE VIEW docs as
SELECT t2.subject as docID, t2.object as data
FROM triples t1, triples t2
WHERE t1.property = 'category' AND t1.object = 'toy'
AND t2.property = 'description'
AND t1.subject = t2.subject;
```

The triple model allows to write this and other queries using simple and application-independent patterns. However, this flexibility comes at the price of having to reconstruct the typical relational row (product,category,description, ...) at query time, which requires self-joins of a possibly large triples table. Vertical partitioning of the set of triples can address performance and scalability issues, as long as the right partitioning approach is chosen for the application context at
hand. The only data-driven partitioning that we apply is by the physical data type of objects (rather than serializ-
ing every literal into strings). It is always applicable and
can improve efficiency, but does not solve scalability is-

Sections 2.1 and 2.2 show how to combine filtering (struc-
tured search) and ranking (unstructured search) of the text
collection defined on-the-fly by such filtering. What makes
these operations still disconnected is their inherently dif-

We reduce this gap by implementing a probabilistic rela-
tional database with tuple-level uncertainty: a probability
column p is appended to all tables, including triples, in our
RDBMS. Semantic triples no longer encode facts, but rather
uncertain events: (subject,property,object,p). Prob-

Encoding probabilistic information is one part of the solu-
tion. We still need to combine and propagate such probabil-

Each relational operator defines how to compute proba-
bility columns. For example, the query above joins indepen-
dent events from the two tables, which makes the resulting
probability of each join match be computed as the product
of two input tuples’ probabilities. If applied correctly, this
algebra allows to keep the probabilistic computation sound.

2.4 Modeling complexity

While SQL / SpinQL interfaces allow to express mixed
structured and unstructured search and can be evaluated
efficiently, they are not well suited for search engine de-

Connecting blocks is a convenient way to express complex
search scenarios declaratively without programming efforts.
The SpinQL queries contained in each block are combined
automatically under the hood.

3. A REAL-WORLD SCENARIO

Figure 3 depicts a simplified version (due to space and
confidentiality constraints) of a real strategy used by one of
our customers in the business of online auctions. Via the
website’s search-bar, users activate this strategy to find the
items they are interested in. The primary retrieval unit in
the database is a lot, which is an item or a set of items
for sale in an auction. Lots are connected to auctions via
triples like (lot23,hasAuction,auction12). Both lots and
auctions have their own identifier and a textual description,
as well as part of a rich semantic graph.

Let us summarize the strategy in Figure 2 in a few steps:

1. The strategy first selects nodes of type lot from the
graph, then it splits in two branches.

2. The branch on the left extracts the lot descriptions, on
which it ranks the lots with the given query keywords,
similarly to the toy scenario (Figure 2).
4. WRAP UP

This work explored the long-standing IR and DB integration issue with particular emphasis on the implementation of industrial-strength search solutions. While [10] already claimed that “databases form a flexible rapid prototyping tool”, we can add that “databases are also a solid and viable solution for search in production environments”.

We showed that by pulling information retrieval into a database it becomes possible to realize a transparent combination of structured and unstructured queries. This opens up new ways to support complex search scenarios. With the right abstractions on top of this infrastructure, realizing effective and efficient search solutions becomes a task for domain and information specialists instead of programmers.

5. REFERENCES