

# A Tour Of Spatial Databases

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction to spatial databases</b>	<b>21</b>
1.1	Overview . . . . .	21
1.2	Who Can Benefit from Spatial Data Management? . . . . .	22
1.3	GIS and SDBMS . . . . .	23
1.4	Three Classes of Users for Spatial Databases . . . . .	24
1.5	An Example of an SDBMS Application . . . . .	26
1.6	A Stroll Through Spatial Databases . . . . .	31
1.6.1	Space Taxonomy and Data Models . . . . .	31
1.6.2	Query Language . . . . .	32
1.6.3	Query Processing . . . . .	33
1.6.4	File Organization and Indices . . . . .	36
1.6.5	Query Optimization . . . . .	39
1.6.6	Data Mining . . . . .	40
1.7	Summary . . . . .	42
<b>2</b>	<b>Spatial Concepts and Data Models</b>	<b>45</b>
2.1	Models of Spatial Information . . . . .	46
2.1.1	Field-based model . . . . .	46
2.1.2	Object-Based Models . . . . .	48
2.1.3	Spatial Data Types . . . . .	48
2.1.4	Operations on Spatial Objects . . . . .	49
2.1.5	Dynamic Spatial Operations . . . . .	52
2.1.6	Mapping Spatial Objects into Java . . . . .	53
2.2	Three-Step Database Design . . . . .	59
2.2.1	The Entity-Relationship (ER) Model . . . . .	60
2.2.2	The Relational Model . . . . .	62
2.2.3	Mapping the ER Model to the Relational Model . . . . .	63

2.3	Trends: Extending the ER Model with Spatial Concepts . . . . .	65
2.3.1	Extending the ER Model with Pictograms . . . . .	68
2.4	Trends: Object-Oriented Data Modeling with UML . . . . .	72
2.4.1	Comparison between ER and UML . . . . .	74
2.5	Summary . . . . .	76
<b>3</b>	<b>Spatial Query Languages</b>	<b>81</b>
3.1	Standard Database Query Languages . . . . .	83
3.1.1	World Database . . . . .	83
3.2	Relational Algebra . . . . .	84
3.2.1	The <b>Select</b> and <b>Project</b> Operations . . . . .	84
3.2.2	Set Operations . . . . .	85
3.2.3	Join Operation . . . . .	86
3.3	Basic SQL Primer . . . . .	87
3.3.1	Data Definition Language . . . . .	88
3.3.2	Data Manipulation Language . . . . .	88
3.3.3	Basic Form of an SQL Query . . . . .	89
3.3.4	Example Queries in SQL . . . . .	89
3.3.5	Summary of Relational Algebra and SQL . . . . .	92
3.4	Extending SQL for spatial data . . . . .	98
3.4.1	The OGIS Standard for Extending SQL . . . . .	98
3.4.2	Limitations of the Standard . . . . .	100
3.5	Example Queries Which Emphasize Spatial Aspects . . . . .	100
3.6	Trends: Object-Relational SQL . . . . .	105
3.6.1	A Glance at SQL3 . . . . .	105
3.6.2	Object-Relational Schema . . . . .	106
3.6.3	Example Queries . . . . .	108
3.7	Summary . . . . .	110
3.8	Appendix: <i>State Park Database</i> . . . . .	116
3.8.1	Example Queries in Relational Algebra . . . . .	117
<b>4</b>	<b>Spatial Storage and Indexing</b>	<b>121</b>
4.1	Storage: Disks and Files . . . . .	123
4.1.1	Disk Geometry and Implications . . . . .	124
4.1.2	Buffer Manager . . . . .	125

4.1.3	Field, Record, and File . . . . .	125
4.1.4	File Structures . . . . .	126
4.1.5	Clustering . . . . .	128
4.2	Spatial Indexing . . . . .	135
4.2.1	Grid Files . . . . .	136
4.2.2	R-trees . . . . .	138
4.2.3	Cost Models . . . . .	143
4.3	Trends . . . . .	144
4.3.1	TR*-Tree for Object Decomposition . . . . .	144
4.3.2	Concurrency Control . . . . .	146
4.3.3	Spatial Join Index . . . . .	149
4.4	Summary . . . . .	153
<b>5</b>	<b>Query Processing and Optimization</b> . . . . .	<b>157</b>
5.1	Evaluation of Spatial Operations . . . . .	158
5.1.1	Overview . . . . .	158
5.1.2	Spatial Operations . . . . .	158
5.1.3	Two-Step Query Processing of Object Operations . . . . .	159
5.1.4	Techniques for Spatial Selection . . . . .	161
5.1.5	General Spatial Selection . . . . .	162
5.1.6	Algorithms for Spatial-Join Operations . . . . .	163
5.1.7	Strategies for Spatial Aggregated Operation: Nearest Neighbor . . . . .	166
5.2	Query Optimization . . . . .	167
5.2.1	Logical Transformation . . . . .	167
5.2.2	Cost-Based Optimization: Dynamic Programming . . . . .	172
5.3	Analysis of Spatial Index Structures . . . . .	173
5.3.1	Enumeration of Alternate Plans . . . . .	176
5.3.2	Decomposition and Merge in Hybrid Architecture . . . . .	177
5.4	Distributed Spatial Database Systems . . . . .	180
5.4.1	Distributed DBMS Architecture . . . . .	180
5.4.2	The Semijoin Operation . . . . .	181
5.4.3	Web based Spatial Database Systems . . . . .	181
5.5	Parallel Spatial Database Systems . . . . .	184
5.5.1	Hardware Architecture . . . . .	185
5.5.2	Parallel Query Evaluation . . . . .	186

5.5.3	Application: Real-Time Terrain Visualization . . . . .	188
5.6	Summary . . . . .	192
<b>6</b>	<b>Spatial Networks</b>	<b>197</b>
6.1	Example Network Databases . . . . .	198
6.2	Conceptual, Logical, and Physical Data Models . . . . .	200
6.2.1	A Logical Data Model . . . . .	200
6.2.2	Physical Data Models . . . . .	202
6.3	Query Language for Graphs . . . . .	207
6.3.1	Shortcomings of Relational Algebra . . . . .	207
6.3.2	SQL CONNECT clause . . . . .	208
6.3.3	Trends: SQL3 Recursion . . . . .	211
6.3.4	Example Queries on the BART System . . . . .	212
6.3.5	Trends: SQL3 ADTs for Networks . . . . .	215
6.4	Graph Algorithms . . . . .	217
6.4.1	Path-Query Processing . . . . .	217
6.4.2	Graph Traversal Algorithms . . . . .	217
6.4.3	Best First A* Algorithm . . . . .	220
6.4.4	Hierarchical Strategies . . . . .	221
6.5	Access Methods for Spatial Networks . . . . .	226
6.5.1	A Measure of I/O Cost for Network Operations . . . . .	227
6.5.2	A Graph-Partitioning Approach to Reduce Disk I/O . . . . .	227
6.5.3	CCAM: A Connctivity Clustered Access Method for Spatial Network . . . . .	228
6.5.4	Summary . . . . .	232
<b>7</b>	<b>Introduction to Spatial Data Mining</b>	<b>237</b>
7.1	Pattern Discovery . . . . .	238
7.1.1	The Data-Mining Process . . . . .	238
7.1.2	Statistics and Data Mining . . . . .	240
7.1.3	Data Mining as a Search Problem . . . . .	240
7.1.4	Unique Features of Spatial Data Mining . . . . .	240
7.1.5	Famous Historical Examples of Spatial Data Exploration . . . . .	241
7.2	Motivating Spatial Data Mining . . . . .	242
7.2.1	An Illustrative Application Domain . . . . .	242
7.2.2	Measures of Spatial Form . . . . .	244

7.2.3	Spatial Statistical Models . . . . .	246
7.2.4	The Data-Mining Trinity . . . . .	248
7.3	Classification Techniques . . . . .	250
7.3.1	Linear Regression . . . . .	250
7.3.2	Spatial Regression . . . . .	251
7.3.3	Model Evaluation . . . . .	251
7.3.4	Predicting Location Using Map Similarity (PLUMS) . . . . .	253
7.3.5	Markov Random Fields . . . . .	254
7.4	Association Rule Discovery Techniques . . . . .	258
7.4.1	<i>Apriori</i> : An Algorithm for Calculating Frequent Itemsets . . . . .	258
7.4.2	Spatial Association Rules . . . . .	260
7.4.3	Co-location Rules . . . . .	260
7.5	Clustering . . . . .	263
7.5.1	<i>K-medoid</i> : An Algorithm for Clustering . . . . .	266
7.5.2	Clustering, Mixture Analysis, and the EM Algorithm . . . . .	267
7.5.3	Strategies for Clustering Large Spatial Databases . . . . .	271
7.6	Spatial Outlier Detection . . . . .	272
7.7	Summary . . . . .	279
7.8	Appendix: Bayesian Calculus . . . . .	280
7.8.1	Conditional Probability . . . . .	280
7.8.2	Maximum Likelihood . . . . .	280
<b>8</b>	<b>Trends in Spatial Database</b> . . . . .	<b>285</b>
8.1	Database Support for Field Entities . . . . .	286
8.1.1	Raster and Image Operations . . . . .	286
8.1.2	Storage and Indexing . . . . .	290
8.2	Content-Based Retrieval . . . . .	291
8.2.1	Topological Similarity . . . . .	292
8.2.2	Directional Similarity . . . . .	292
8.2.3	Distance Similarity . . . . .	293
8.2.4	Attribute Relational Graphs . . . . .	294
8.2.5	Retrieval Step . . . . .	294
8.3	Introduction to Spatial Data Warehouses . . . . .	297
8.3.1	Aggregate Operations . . . . .	297
8.3.2	An Example of Geometric Aggregation . . . . .	300

8.3.3 Aggregation Hierarchy . . . . . 301

8.3.4 What Is an Aggregation Hierarchy Used For? . . . . . 302

8.4 Summary . . . . . 305

DRAFT

# List of Figures

1.1	The evolution of the abbreviation GIS over the last two decades. In the 1980's GIS was Geographic Information System; in the 1990's, Geographic Information Science was the preferred phrase, and now the trend is toward Geographic Information Services. . . . .	25
1.2	Landsat image of Ramsey county, Minnesota, with spatial layers of information superimposed . . . . .	26
1.3	Census blocks with boundary ID:1050 . . . . .	27
1.4	Four tables required in a relational database with overlapping attributes to accommodate the polyline datatype. . . . .	28
1.5	Evolution of databases [Khoshafian and Baker, 1998] . . . . .	29
1.6	Three-layer architecture . . . . .	30
1.7	Two relations to illustrate the difference between join and spatial join . . . .	34
1.8	The filter-refine strategy for reducing computation time . . . . .	35
1.9	Determining pairs of intersecting rectangles. (a) Two sets of rectangles: $R$ and $S$ . (b) A rectangle $T$ with its lower-left and upper-right corners marked. (c) The sorted set of rectangles with their joins. Note the filtering nature of the plane sweep algorithm. In the example, twelve possible rectangle pairs could be joined. The filtering step reduced the number of possibilities to five. An exact geometry test can be used to check which of the five pairs of objects satisfy the query predicate [Beckmann et al., 1990]. . . . .	36
1.10	(a) Programmer's viewpoint; (b) DBMS designer's viewpoint. . . . .	37
1.11	Different ways of ordering multidimensional data: (a) row order; (b) Z-order. If a line is drawn following the numbers in ascending order the Z pattern will become obvious. . . . .	38
1.12	(a) Binary tree; (b) B-tree . . . . .	39
1.13	R-tree extends B-tree for spatial objects . . . . .	40

2.1	The object-field dichotomy. (a) A map showing three forest stands: <i>Pine</i> , <i>Fir</i> , <i>Oak</i> . (b) An <i>object</i> viewpoint representing the map as a collection of three objects. Each object has a unique identifier, a dominant tree species, and an area. The boundary of the area, a polygon is specified by the coordinates. (c) A <i>field</i> viewpoint, where each point is mapped to the value of the dominant tree species. . . . .	57
2.2	An OGIS proposal for building blocks of spatial geometry in UML notation [OGIS, 1999] . . . . .	58
2.3	The 9-interesection method [Egenhofer et al., 1989] . . . . .	58
2.4	An ER diagram for the <i>State-Park</i> example. . . . .	62
2.5	Relational schema for the State-Park example . . . . .	66
2.6	Schema for point, line, polygon, and elevation . . . . .	67
2.7	ER diagram for the <i>State-Park</i> example, with pictograms . . . . .	71
2.8	The <b>State-Park</b> example in UML . . . . .	72
3.1	The ER diagram of the <b>World</b> database . . . . .	84
3.2	The Buffer Of a River and Points Within and Outside . . . . .	102
3.3	Sample objects [Clementini and Felice, 1995] . . . . .	114
3.4	The ER diagram of the <b>StatePark</b> database . . . . .	116
4.1	Mapping the records from Country, City and River tables to disk pages . . . . .	127
4.2	Hashed file organization for City table . . . . .	127
4.3	Ordered file organization for City table . . . . .	128
4.4	Generating a Z-curve [Asano et al., 1996] . . . . .	129
4.5	Generating a Hilbert curve [Asano et al., 1996] . . . . .	130
4.6	Example to calculate the z-value . . . . .	131
4.7	A trace for finding z-values . . . . .	131
4.8	Example showing Hilber curve translation . . . . .	132
4.9	Ilustration of clusters: (a) Two clusters for the Z-curve; (b) one cluster for the Hilbert curve . . . . .	133
4.10	Secondary Index on the City table . . . . .	135
4.11	Primary Index on the City table . . . . .	136
4.12	A fixed-grid structure for points (A, B, C, D) . . . . .	137
4.13	A two-dimensional grid directory . . . . .	138
4.14	Grid file with linear scales . . . . .	139
4.15	A collection of spatial objects . . . . .	140
4.16	R-tree hierarchy . . . . .	141

4.17	Trapezoids to decompose the object . . . . .	144
4.18	A subsection of an R-link tree [Kornacker and D.Banks, 1995] . . . . .	148
4.19	Constructing a join-index from two relations . . . . .	150
4.20	Comparison of tuple-level adjacency matrices for equi-join and spatial join . . . . .	151
4.21	Construction of a Page-Connectivity Graph (PCG) from a Join Index. . . . .	152
4.22	Exercise 1 . . . . .	155
5.1	Multistep processing [Brinkoff et al,1994.] . . . . .	160
5.2	Schema for a query optimizer . . . . .	168
5.3	Query tree . . . . .	169
5.4	Pushing down: select operation . . . . .	169
5.5	Pushing down not always helpful . . . . .	170
5.6	An execution strategy: query-evaluation plan . . . . .	177
5.7	An execution strategy: query tree . . . . .	178
5.8	Two methods of decomposition . . . . .	179
5.9	Two distributed relations: The FARM relation has 1,000 tuples, and the DISEASE_MAP has 100 tuples. . . . .	182
5.10	Web GIS Architecture . . . . .	182
5.11	Parallel architecture options . . . . .	185
5.12	Example of allocations by different methods . . . . .	188
5.13	Components of the terrain-visualization system . . . . .	189
5.14	A sample polygonal map and a range query. . . . .	189
5.15	Different modules of the parallel formulations . . . . .	190
5.16	Alternatives for polygon/bounding-box division among processors . . . . .	191
6.1	Two examples of spatial networks . . . . .	199
6.2	Three different representations of a graph . . . . .	203
6.3	A Graph Model for River Network example . . . . .	204
6.4	A relation $R$ and its transitive closure $X$ . . . . .	207
6.5	SQL's CONNECT clause operation in working . . . . .	210
6.6	The result of BFS and DFS on a graph with source node 1 . . . . .	219
6.7	Routing Example . . . . .	222
6.8	Routing Example . . . . .	223
6.9	Graph with its denormalized table representation . . . . .	228
6.10	Twin Cities road map showing the original and edge-cut data . . . . .	230
6.11	Clustering and storing a sample network (key represents spatial order) . . . . .	231

7.1	Data-mining Process. The data-mining process involves a close interaction between a domain expert and a data-mining analyst. The output of the process is a set of hypothesis (patterns), which can then be rigorously verified by statistical tools and visualized using a GIS. Finally the analyst can interpret the patterns and make and recommend appropriate action. . . . .	239
7.2	Search results of data-mining algorithm. (a) One potential pattern out of a total of $2^{16}$ . (b) If we constrain the patterns to be such that each $4 \times 4$ block can only be assigned one class, then the potential number of patterns is reduced to $2^4$ . Based on other information, a data-mining algorithm can quickly discover the “optimal” pattern. . . . .	241
7.3	Darr wetland, 1995. (a) Learning dataset: The geometry of the marshland and the locations of the nests; (b) spatial distribution of <i>vegetation durability</i> over the marshland; (c) spatial distribution of <i>water depth</i> ; and (d) spatial distribution of <i>distance to open water</i> . . . . .	243
7.4	Spatial distribution satisfying random distribution assumptions of classical regression . . . . .	243
7.5	(a) A spatial lattice; (b) its contiguity matrix; (c) its row-normalized contiguity matrix. . . . .	245
7.6	The Moran’s $I$ coefficient. The pixel value sets of the two images are identical, but they have different Moran’s $I$ coefficients. . . . .	246
7.7	The four possible outcomes for a two-class prediction . . . . .	252
7.8	ROC curves.(a) Comparison of the ROC curves for classical and spatial autoregression regression (SAR) models on the 1995 Darr wetland data. (b) Comparison of the two models on the 1995 Stubble wetland data. . . . .	252
7.9	Problems of ROC curves with spatial data. (a)The actual locations of nest’s; (b)pixels with actual nests; (c)location predicted by a model; (d)location predicted by another mode. Prediction (d) is spatially more accurate than (c). Classical measures of classification accuracy will not capture this distinction. . . . .	253
7.10	Spatial datasets with <i>salt and pepper</i> spatial patterns . . . . .	255
7.11	Example database, frequent itemsets, and high-confidence rules . . . . .	259
7.12	Sample co-location patterns . . . . .	262
7.13	Two interpretations of spatial clustering. If the goal is to identify locations which dominate the surroundings (in terms of influence), then the clusters are S1 and S2. If the goal is to identify areas of homogeneous values, the clusters are A1 and A2. . . . .	264
7.14	(a) A gray-scale $4 \times 4$ image. (b) The labels of the image generated using the EM algorithm and (c) The labels generated for the same image using the Neighborhood EM algorithm. Notice the spatial smoothing attained by modifying the objective function. . . . .	268

7.15	Using the Neighborhood EM algorithm. (a) As expected clustering without any spatial information leads to poor results. (b) including spatial information ( $\beta = 1.0$ ) leads to dramatic improvement of results. (c) overemphasizing spatial information ( $\beta = 2.0$ ) again leads to poor results. . . . .	270
7.16	A Data Set for Outlier Detection . . . . .	273
7.17	Variogram Cloud and Moran Scatterplot to Detect Spatial Outliers . . . . .	274
7.18	Scatterplot and Spatial Statistic $Z_{s(x)}$ to Detect Spatial Outliers . . . . .	275
7.19	A network of traffic sensor stations . . . . .	276
7.20	Spatial and temporal neighborhoods . . . . .	277
7.21	Spatial outliers in traffic volume data . . . . .	278
8.1	A continous function and its raster representation . . . . .	287
8.2	Example of a local operation:Thresholding . . . . .	287
8.3	Neighborhoods of a cell and an example of a focal operation:FocalSum . . . . .	288
8.4	Example of a zonal operation: ZonalSum . . . . .	289
8.5	Example of a global operation . . . . .	289
8.6	The <code>trim</code> operation: dimension preserving . . . . .	290
8.7	The <code>slice</code> operation: dimension reduction . . . . .	290
8.8	Different strategies for storing arrays . . . . .	291
8.9	The topological neighborhood graph [Ang et al., 1998]. The distance between two relations is the shortest path on this graph . . . . .	293
8.10	The directional neighborhood graph [Ang et al., 1998]. The distance between two relations is the shortest solid line path on this graph . . . . .	293
8.11	Visual perspective: <code>distance</code> as the least discriminating spatial predicate . . . . .	294
8.12	An image and its attribute relational graph (ARG) [Petrakis and Faloutsos, 1997]. The ARG is mapped onto an <u>N</u> -dimensional feature point . . . . .	295
8.13	The general methodology of content-based retrieval . . . . .	296
8.14	Computation of distributive aggregate function . . . . .	298
8.15	Computation of algebraic aggregate function . . . . .	299
8.16	An example of GIS aggregate function, geometric-union . . . . .	300
8.17	The 0-D, 1-D, 2-D, and 3-D data cubes . . . . .	302
8.18	An example of a data cube . . . . .	303
8.19	An example of using the <code>group-by</code> operators . . . . .	304

DRAFT

# List of Tables

1.1	List of common GIS analysis operations [Albrecht, 1998] . . . . .	24
1.2	Different types of spaces with an example operation . . . . .	32
2.1	Examples of topological and nontopological operations . . . . .	50
2.2	Representative example of dynamic spatial operations [Worboys, 1995]. The three fundamental dynamic operations are <i>create</i> , <i>destroy</i> and <i>update</i> . Here we list some variations of <i>create</i> and <i>update</i> . . . . .	53
2.3	ER and UML concepts . . . . .	75
3.1	The tables of the <b>World</b> database . . . . .	93
3.2	Results of two basic operations in relational algebra: select and project . . . . .	94
3.3	The cross-product of relations $R$ and $S$ . . . . .	94
3.4	The results of set operations . . . . .	94
3.5	Steps of the conditional join operation . . . . .	95
3.6	The <b>Country</b> and <b>River</b> schema in SQL . . . . .	95
3.7	Tables from the select, project, and select and project operations . . . . .	96
3.8	Results of example queries . . . . .	97
3.9	A sample of operations listed in the OGIS standard for SQL [OGIS, 1999] . . . . .	99
3.10	Basic datatypes . . . . .	100
3.11	Results of query 7 . . . . .	104
3.12	The sequence of creation of the <b>Country</b> table . . . . .	108
3.13	Tables for the <b>StatePark</b> database . . . . .	117
4.1	The characteristics of a traditional DBMS, a Programming Application and an SDBMS on the basis of relative CPU and I/O costs. . . . .	123
4.2	Physical and performance parameters of the Western Digital AC36400 disk drive . . . . .	124
6.1	The <b>Stop</b> and <b>DirectedRoute</b> tables of <b>BART</b> . . . . .	204
6.2	The <b>RouteStop</b> table of <b>BART</b> . . . . .	205

6.3	The River and FallsInto relations of River Network . . . . .	206
6.4	Important ADTs in networks . . . . .	216
7.1	Habitat variables used for predicting the locations of the nests of the red-winged blackbirds. There are six independent variables and one dependent variable. The type of the dependent variable is binary. . . . .	242
7.2	Moran's <i>I</i> coefficient of explanatory variables to predict nest locations for the red-winged blackbird . . . . .	246
7.3	A $16 \times 16$ gray-scale image. . . . .	247
7.4	Support and confidence of three rules . . . . .	258
7.5	Examples of spatial association rules discovered in the 1995 Darr wetland data	261
7.6	Four options for local search in clustering . . . . .	267
7.7	Database of facilities . . . . .	282
8.1	Aggregation operations . . . . .	298
8.2	SQL queries for map reclassification . . . . .	300
8.3	Table of GROUP-BY queries . . . . .	301
8.4	Slice on the value "America" of the Region dimension . . . . .	303
8.5	Dice on the value "1994" of the Year dimension and the value "America" of the Region dimension . . . . .	304

## Preface

Over the years it has become evident in many areas of computer applications that the functionality of database management systems has to be enlarged to include spatially referenced data. The study of spatial database management systems (SDBMS) is a step in the direction of providing models and algorithms for the efficient handling of data related to space.

Spatial databases have now been an active area of research for over two decades. Their results, e.g., spatial multidimensional indexing, are being used in many different areas. The principle impetus for research in SDBMS comes from the needs of existing applications such as geographical information systems (GIS) and computer aided design (CAD), as well as potential applications such as multimedia information systems, data warehousing and NASA's earth observation system. These spatial applications have over one million existing users.

Major players in the commercial database industry have products specifically designed to handle spatial data. These products include the Spatial Data Engine (SDE), by Environment Systems Research Institute (ESRI); as well as Spatial Datablades for object-relational database servers from many vendors including Oracle, IBM and Informix. Research prototypes include Postgres, Geo2, and Paradise. The functionality provided by these systems includes a set of spatial data types such as the point, line, and polygon, and a set of spatial operations, including intersection, enclosure and distance. An industry-wide standard set of spatial data types and operations has been developed by the Open Geographic Information Systems (OGIS) consortium. The spatial types and operations can be made a part of an object-relational query language such as SQL3. The performance enhancement provided by these systems includes a multidimensional spatial index and algorithms for spatial access methods, spatial range queries, and spatial joins.

The integration of spatial data into traditional databases amounts to resolving many nontrivial issues at various levels. They range from deep ontological questions about the modeling of space, for example whether it should be field-based or object-based, thus paralleling the wave-particle duality in physics, to more mundane but important issues about file management. These diverse topics make research in SDBMS truly interdisciplinary.

Let us use the example of a country dataset to highlight the special needs of spatial databases. A country has at least one nonspatial datum, its name, and one spatial datum, its boundary. There is no ambiguity about storing or representing its name, but unfortunately it is not true for its boundary. Assuming that the boundary is represented as a collection of straight lines, we need to include a spatial data type *line* and the companion types *point* and *region* in the database system to facilitate spatial queries on the object *country*. These new data types need to be manipulated and composed according to some fixed rules leading to the creation of a spatial algebra. Since spatial data is inherently visual and usually voluminous, database systems have to be augmented to provide visual query processing and special spatial indexing. Other important database issues like concurrency control, bulk loading, storage, and security have to be revisited and fine-tuned to build an effective spatial database management system.

This book evolved from the class notes of a graduate course on Scientific Databases (Csci 8705) in University of Minnesota. Researchers and students both within and outside the Computer Science Department found the course very useful and applicable to their work. Despite the good response and high level of interest in the topic, no textbook available in the market was able to meet the interdisciplinary needs of the audience. A recent book by [Scholl et al., 2001] focusses on traditional topics related to query languages and access methods while leaving out current topics such as spatial networks (e.g. roadmaps) and data mining for spatial patterns. A recent monograph by [Adam and Gangopadhyay, 1997] confines itself to cataloging research papers on database issues in GIS, with little reference to the industrial state-of-the-art, Another [Worboys, 1995] also focuses on GIS and has only two chapters devoted to database issues. Many of these book did not provide adequate instructional support, e.g. questions and problems at the end of each chapter to allow students to assess their understanding of the main concepts. Not suprisingly, our colleagues in academia working in databases, parallel computing, multimedia information, civil and mechanical engineering and forestry have expressed a strong desire for a comprehensive text on spatial databases. Industry professionals involved in software development for GIS and CAD/CAM have also made several requests for information on spatial databases in a collected form.

As a first step towards developing this book we completed a survey paper, “Spatial databases: Accomplishments and Research Needs,” for IEEE Transactions on Knowledge and Data Engineering. We noticed that the research literature in Computer Science was skewed with numerous publications on some topics (e.g. spatial indexes, spatial join algorithms) and relatively scarce publications on many other important topics (e.g. conceptual modeling of spatial data). We looked to GIS industry as well as GIS researchers outside Computer Science for ideas in these areas for the relevant chapters in the book.

Being on sabbatical for the academic year 1997-98 facilitated initial work on the book. We completed a draft of many chapters by expanding on the course notes of CSci 8705 based on research literature. First draft of the book was used in database courses at the University of Minnesota. Subsequently the book was revised using feedback from reviewers, collagues and students.

We believe the following features are unique aspects of this book:

- The aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive overview of management systems. It covers current topics, e.g. spatial networks, spatial data mining in addition to traditional topics, e.g. query languages, indexing, query processing,
- A set of questions and problems is provided in each chapter to allow readers to test understanding of core concepts, to apply core concepts in new application domain and to think beyond the material presented in the chapter. Additional instruction aids (e.g. laboratories, lecture notes) are planned on the course web-site.
- A concerted effort has been made to “look beyond GIS.” Techniques from SDBMS are finding applications in many diverse areas including multimedia information, CAD/CAM, astronomy, meterology, molecular biology, and computational mechanics.
- In each chapter, we have tried to bring out the object-relational database framework,

which is a clear trend in commercial database applications. This framework allows spatial databases to reuse relational database facilities when possible, while extending relational database facilities when needed.

- We will use spatial data types and operations specified by standards (e.g. OGIS) to illustrate common spatial database queries. These standards can be incorporated into an object-relational query language like SQL-3.

## Chapter Organization

The book is divided into eight chapters, each one an important subarea within spatial databases. We introduce the field of spatial databases in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, we focus on spatial data models and introduce the field vs. object dichotomy and its implications for database design. Chapter 3 discusses the necessary enhancements required to make traditional query languages compatible with spatial databases. We provide an extensive discussion of various proposals to extend SQL with spatial capabilities. Spatial databases deal with extraordinarily large amounts of data, and it is essential for DBMS to provide sophisticated storage, compression and indexing methods to enhance the performance of query processing. Spatial data storage and indexing schemes were covered in Chapter 4. From query languages and indexing, we move on to query processing and optimization in Chapter 5. Here we discover that many standard techniques from traditional databases have to be abandoned or drastically modified in order to be applicable in a spatial context. We also introduce the filter-refine paradigm for spatial query processing. In chapter 6, we will show how spatial database technology is being applied to spatial networks. In this chapter we will also cover network data models and query languages. Chapter 7 covers the emerging field of spatial data mining. In this chapter we expose the readers to the concept of spatial dependency that is prevalent in spatial data sets, and show how this can be modeled and incorporated into data mining process. Finally in Chapter 8, we discuss emerging trends in spatial databases.

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