

# Developing A Web-based User Interface for Semantic Information Retrieval

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**Abstract.** While there are now a number of languages and frameworks that enable computer-based systems to search stored data semantically, the optimal design for effective user interfaces for such systems is still unclear. Such interfaces should mask unnecessary query detail from users, yet still allow them to build queries of arbitrary complexity without significant restrictions. We developed a user interface supporting semantic query generation for SemanticOrganizer, a tool used by scientists and engineers at NASA to construct networks of knowledge and data. Through this interface users can select node types, node attributes and node links to build ad-hoc semantic queries for searching the SemanticOrganizer network.

## 1 Introduction

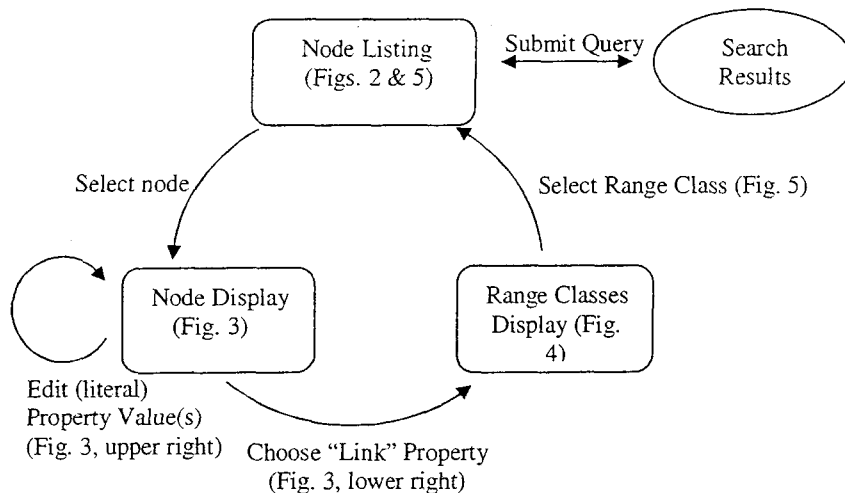
To imbue web documents with machine-readable semantic content, authors now have formats such as RDF for storing such content [1] and tools like Annotea and the SHOE Knowledge Annotator [2] to help create such content. Furthermore, standards for query languages to search this content are also beginning to emerge [3]. However, there are still very few tools to help users create semantic queries in any of these languages, and the design of such tools remains the subject of ongoing research.

We have developed a user interface for building semantic queries of arbitrary complexity for SemanticOrganizer<sup>1</sup> (SO), a combined knowledge and data repository that features an extensive semantic network. Through this interface a user can generate a complex query to search the SO knowledge space for sets of items consistent with the query. The queries are stored as RDF models with anonymous nodes, hidden within HTML pages of the interface, and incrementally updated as the user builds a query.

We approached the design of this interface with the twin goals of accommodating users who know nothing or very little about RDF and presenting the queries in a simple, straightforward manner. SO has a wide array of users who vary in technical

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<sup>1</sup> <http://sciencedesk.arc.nasa.gov/>

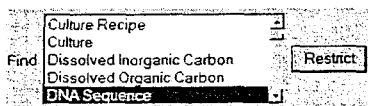


**Figure 1.** Flow of user interaction with the SemanticOrganizer query building interface

savvy and who use a variety of computing platforms and software. By and large, most user interaction with SO is via HTML forms, and we have eschewed more sophisticated interfaces such as specialized java applet widgets largely because of cross-platform/browser compatibility issues. Thus, we sought to develop a semantic searching interface using only HTML technology.

## Methods

Because the task of building all but the simplest query can require substantial cognitive reasoning on the part of users, we chose a successive refinement design for the query building interface (Fig. 1). Users iteratively add "terms" to a query; each term is represented as a typed, but otherwise anonymous node in the RDF model. Each node is added by linking it to a node already in the model through a "link" type property selected from the SO knowledge network. The query can be submitted for execution any time after the first node is created and added to the model. In fact, the user



Your query so far:

**Figure 2.** The **Node Type Selection** display of the query builder interface. The user must select a type for the first (and each successive) node in the query

can continue to refine the query and/or submit it for execution even after search results are presented.

Figures 2 through 7 show the development of a query to search for all DNA sequences from any bacterial culture of a (stromatolite) sample with certain properties. Figure 2 shows a user beginning to build a query using the interface. The interface is separated

by a simple horizontal line into an upper **query building area**, in which users select and edit terms in the query, and a lower **query execution area**, in which users can choose to submit a query, view search results, or erase the current query and begin again. Because the query (in its current state) is stored client-side (i.e., embedded within the web page) and not server-side, the user can “back up” to previous versions of the query at will using only their browser’s navigation buttons and pursue different paths of query refinement.

As shown in Figure 2, the user begins to build the query by selecting the type “DNA Sequence” for a new (anonymous) node in the model, labelled “DNA Sequence 1.” All nodes are typed and so labeled by order of creation. Specifying the type for a node in the query adds a statement to the RDF model that restricts the type

The screenshot shows a web interface for editing node properties. On the left, a vertical sidebar contains a 'Find' button and a node labeled 'DNA Sequence 1'. The main area is a form with the following fields:

- Name: Select (dropdown)
- Notes: (text area)
- % Identity: (text input)
- GenBank Accession#: (text input)
- Genus: (text input)
- Species: (text input)
- Taxa: (text input)
- Database Submitted to: Select (dropdown)
- Gene: Select (dropdown)
- Notes on Phylogeny (BLAST, etc.): (text area)
- Reading Direction: Select (dropdown)
- Sequence File Format: Select (dropdown)
- Sequence Origin: Select (dropdown)
- Sequencing Date: (text input)
- Sequencing Laboratory: (text input)
- Sequencing Method: Select (dropdown)

Below these fields is a dropdown menu for selecting a link type, with options: produced for (Project), sequenced by (Person), sequenced from (Sample (other), Mat Sample, W...), sequenced from (Culture), and unspecified (Item (other), SEM Image, Phyl...). Below the dropdown is a button labeled 'Edit Slot Value(s) and/or Select Link'.

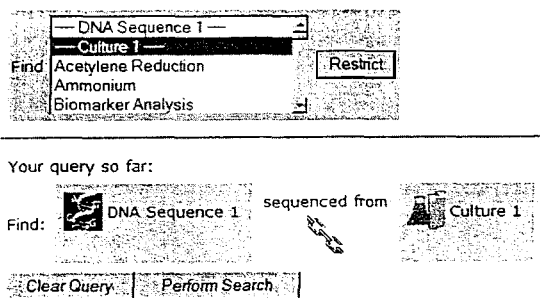
Below the form, the text 'Your query so far:' is followed by a 'Find:' field containing 'DNA Sequence 1'. At the bottom are two buttons: 'Clear Query' and 'Perform Search'.

**Figure 3.** The Edit Node Properties step. After selecting a type for the new node, the user is presented with a form to select/edit literal property values (upper right) and/or choose a “link” type property (lower right) to connect the new node to another node

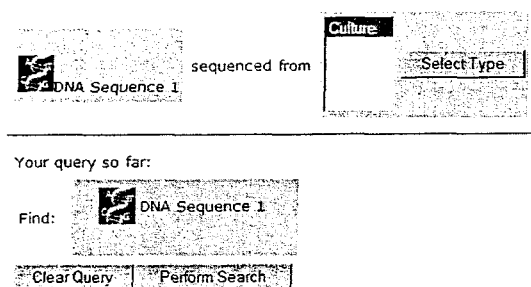
property of the node to the appropriate class. The interface requires the user to select a type for each node before any of the node's properties can be defined. While this design choice initially followed logically from the types of queries we solicited from potential users (e.g., "Find all experiments...", "Find all samples...", etc.), it also obviated the need to de-

velop methods for users to sort through the dozens or even hundreds of possible properties defined on all types in a given domain. Instead, the interface only needs to display those properties whose domain is the type of node selected.

After the user chooses the type of node to be added to the model, the interface displays the Edit Node form (Fig. 3). This form allows the user to enter or select literal-valued properties of the node, or select from a list of properties that have other nodes as ranges to link this node to other nodes in the model. Literals can be specified by entering them directly or selecting from a list of allowed values (if such a list is defined for the property type) and submitting the form; the returned page displays the values along with an adjacent "scissors" icon which can be used to submit the form again, this time removing the value. Values for any number of literal properties may be submitted all at once or in any sequence as many times as desired. However, once the user selects a "link" type property and submits the form, the interface requires the user to specify a class for the range of this property (Fig. 4). After the user has selected a range type, a new node ("Culture 1") is added to the model, as well as a statement restricting its type to the type specified, and a statement linking the two



**Figure 4.** The query after one round of node editing. The user is proceeding to shape the query by selecting the anonymous node "Culture 1" as the next node to edit



**Figure 5.** After selecting a "link" type property, the user is required to choose from a set of possible range classes. In this case, there is only one possible range class, "Culture", defined for the "sequenced from" property

nodes through the selected property. This action returns the user to the Node Listing Display, showing the two newly created anonymous nodes along with the list of all node types (Fig. 5).

At this point the user can either select one of the existing nodes in the model (to add other links and/or property values) or choose the

where

★ Stromatolite Sample 1

Name:

Notes:

Collection Date:

Collection Method:

Collection Time:

Description:  lithification

Microorganisms:  Cyanobacteria

Select Link:

---

Your query so far:

Find:

★ DNA Sequence 1

sequenced from

★ Culture 1

cultivated from

★ Stromatolite Sample 1

Description: lithification

Microorganisms: Cyanobacteria

**Figure 6.** The final complex query to search DNA sequences from any culture cultivated from a sample of Cyanobacteria showing lithification

type for a third new node in the model. He or she can continue the cycle of creating and editing existing nodes at will until satisfied with the query. This cycle could produce, for example, the complex query shown in Figure 6.




In the query execution area of the interface, we display generated queries in tabular form, which is well-supported in HTML. Each node in the query is assigned a corresponding column in the tabular display, and each row displays one or more links between nodes. While this format may not be concise, it is probably superior to merely listing the nodes and links of the model.

We could have designed the interface such that users could create any type of graph structure, including those with cycles. However, the use of HTML tables to display queries with cycles clearly and unambiguously appeared very challenging, if not impossible. Thus, we chose not to allow users to generate cyclical query structures using this initial version of the query-building interface.

At any time during the process of building the complex query, the user may choose to completely erase the query through the “Clear Query” button or execute the query by pressing the “Perform Search” button. Choosing to erasing the query removes the RDF model embedded in the page and returns the user to the first step in the query building process (see Figure 2).

To execute the query, we viewed searching the SO knowledge space using the generated query as a constraint satisfaction problem (CSP) (as others have): the nodes in the query represent the set of variables in the CSP, the items in SO correspond to the domain of possible values for these variables, and the various properties in the RDF model that the user specifies represent the constraints. We developed procedures to

3 search results matching your query:

 DNA Sequence 1	 Culture 1	 Stromatolite Sample 1
<a href="#">HBC-2: 16S rRNA sequence</a>	<a href="#">HBC-2</a>	<a href="#">SB-001</a>
<a href="#">HBC-1: 16S rRNA sequence</a>	<a href="#">HBC-1</a>	<a href="#">SB-001</a>
<a href="#">HBC-3: 16S rRNA sequence(s)</a>	<a href="#">HBC-3</a>	<a href="#">SB-001</a>

**Figure 7.** Example search results. Each row represents a set of possible values for each node in the model

and the possible sets of values for the nodes are listed as rows. Clicking on a particular value shows the item in SO.

solve this CSP using common programming techniques to increase efficiency, including node and arc-consistency tracking.

Figure 7 shows the search results for the query shown in Figure 6. Each node in the query corresponds to a column in the results table,

## Discussion

We present our experience developing a complex query generation interface that we hope will be effective and at the same time intelligible to naïve web users. The missions and scientific activities conducted at NASA often involve users with a wide variety of sophistication in computer science and experience with computing tools. Yet even unsophisticated users have advanced information needs that will require them to be able to specify complex queries.

We will extend the functions of the interface to include more features that users will likely require, such as selecting and searching for multiple values for literal-valued properties (using Boolean OR), specifying ranges of values for special types of literals such as dates and times, and range sets for link-type properties. Because building some queries often requires significant time and thought, we are also developing methods for users to store, retrieve, re-edit and re-execute complex queries.

## References

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