Wolf-Tilo Balke · Ulrich Güntzer · Wolf Siberski

Restricting Skyline Sizes using Weak Pareto Dominance

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Zusammenfassung Skyline-Queries stehen in den letzten Jahren im Fokus der Aufmerksamkeit, da sie eine besonders intuitive Form der Anfragestellung unterstützen. Der Benutzer spezifiziert Präferenzen nur in qualitativer Weise im Bezug auf alle gewünschten Attribute. Im Gegensatz zu numerischen oder Score-basierten Präferenzen, definieren attribut-basierte Präferenzen dabei nicht immer eine totale Ordnung auf den Datenbankobjekten. Sie basieren typischerweise lediglich auf partiellen Ordnungen, die der Benutzer angibt. In solchen Ordnung sind daher viele Objekte unvergleichbar, was die durchschnittliche Größe der Skyline signifikant anwachsen lässt und die Effizienz ihrer Berechnung deutlich verbessert. In dieser Arbeit untersuchen wir die Ableitung interessanter Teilmengen der Pareto-Skyline, die Benutzern einen guten Überblick über die zu erwartenden Objekte für interaktive Aufgaben wie Anfrageverfeinerung oder Relevanz-Feedback bieten. Um nützlich zu sein, müssen diese Teilmengen klein, effizient zu berechnen, für hoch-dimensionale Anfragen geeignet und möglichst repräsentativ sein. Der Schlüssel zu guten Berechnungszeiten und deutlich verkleinerten Skylines ist dabei die Abschwächung der Pareto-Optimalität auf das Konzept der schwachen Pareto-Dominanz. Wir zeigen, dass diese Abschwächung zu intuitiven Ergebnissen führt und die Verwendung effizienter und skalierbarer Anfrageauswertungsalgorithmen erlaubt. Wir werten zuerst die komplette Menge der nicht schwach dominierten Objekte (Restricted Skyline) aus und leiten dann daraus eine besondere Teilmenge jener Objekte ab, die viel versprechend bezüglich des Benutzerinteresses sind (Focused Skyline). Unsere Experimente zur Überprüfung der praktischen Anwendbarkeit unseres Ansatzes zeigen, dass nicht nur die Größe der Resultatmengen deutlich schrumpft, sondern auch die notwendige Auswertungszeit um etwa zwei Größenordnungen reduziert werden kann.

Schlüsselwörter Skyline-Queries, Pareto-Optimalität, Ergebnisgröße, schwache Pareto-Dominanz

Abstract Skyline queries have recently received a lot of attention due to their intuitive query formulation: users can state preferences with respect to several attributes. Unlike numerical or score-based preferences, preferences over discrete value domains do not show an inherent total order, but have to rely on partial orders as stated by the user. In such orders typically many object values are incomparable, increasing the size of skyline sets significantly, and making their computation expensive. In this paper we explore how to enable interactive tasks like query refinement or relevance feedback by providing interesting subsets of the full Pareto skyline, which give users a good overview over the skyline. To be practical these subsets have to be small, efficient to compute, suitable for higher numbers of query predicates, and representative. The key to improved performance and reduced result set sizes is the relaxation of Pareto semantics to the concept of weak Pareto dominance. We argue that this relaxation yields intuitive results and show how it opens up the use of efficient and scalable query processing algorithms. We first derive the complete skyline subset given by weak Pareto dominance called 'restricted skyline' and

Wolf-Tilo Balke
L3S Research Center, Appelstr. 4, 30167 Hannover
Tel.: +49-511-76217712
Fax: +49-511-76217779
E-Mail: balke@l3s.de

Ulrich Güntzer
Institut für Informatik, Universität Tübingen, 72076 Tübingen
Tel.: +49-7071-2975477
Fax: +49-7071-295958
E-Mail: ulrich.guentzer@informatik.uni-tuebingen.de

Wolf Siberski
L3S Research Center, Appelstr. 9a, 30167 Hannover
Tel.: +49-511-76217759
Fax: +49-511-76217779
E-Mail: siberski@l3s.de

then considering the individual performance of objects limit this further to a subset called 'focused skyline'. Assessing the practical impact our experiments show that our approach indeed leads to lean result set sizes and outperforms Pareto skyline computations by up to two orders of magnitude.

Keywords Skyline queries, Pareto optimality, result size, weak Pareto dominance

CR Subject Classification H.3.3

1 Introduction

Due to the ever growing volume of database content and the personalization needs in information searches, human preferences already play an essential part in today's information systems. This is because mere SQL-style queries only too often produce empty or too numerous results. First approaches at cooperative databases as those by [22, 23], handled user queries that retrieved empty results with respect to a database instance by automatic relaxation of query predicates. Using score values to express the utility of database objects with respect to a query, cooperative queries come in various flavors:

- **Top-k queries** (see e.g. [15, 13]) have shifted retrieval models from exact matching of attribute values to the notion of best matching database objects. Top-k models rely on basic scorings of objects for each query predicate and a utility function to aggregate the objects' total scores.
- **Skyline queries** extend this principle to cases where still score-based preferences exist for each query predicate, but no utility function is a-priori known to compromise between predicates (see e.g. [9, 25, 24, 5]). Skyline approaches adopt the principle of Pareto optimality, i.e. only those objects are returned, where no object exists in the database having better or equal predicate values.
- **Multi-objective retrieval** [1] finally allows for the interleaved evaluation of arbitrary compositions of skyline and top-k queries with proven instance-optimal complexity.

Especially the skyline paradigm has proven its usefulness in a variety of applications (e.g., digital item adaptation [19] or location-based services [16]), since users generally cannot be expected to provide sensible weightings for a utility function. But whereas score-based approaches generally allow for efficient query evaluation, their expressiveness in terms of human user preferences remains rather limited, cf. [14]. With the use of preferences modeled as strict partial orders with intuitive "I like A better than B" semantics ([11, 17]), this lack of expressiveness was remedied at the price of more expensive query evaluation. A first evaluation algorithm of such partial order preference queries was given only recently by [10]. Also here the Pareto principle was used for evaluating queries involving several partial order preferences:

- In [17] and [10] a strong Pareto dominance principle called **Pareto accumulation** is used: an object has to be better or identical in all attribute values for the query predicates, and strictly better in at least one to dominate another object.
- In contrast [12] and [2] propose a weak Pareto dominance principle called **Pareto composition**, where an object's attribute values has to be better, identical or *incomparable* in all predicates, and strictly better in at least one to dominate another object.

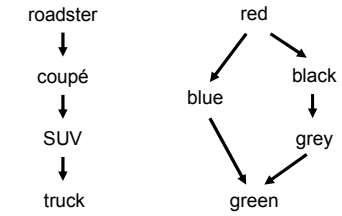
The Pareto principle extends querying capabilities and the result set contains *all* possible best database objects with respect to arbitrary utility functions. On the other hand Pareto sets grow exponentially in size with increasing numbers of preferences [8]. Thus, typical tasks during the query process (like query refinement) rather need a good (and efficiently computed) overview over skylines.

For instance, [21] presents an online algorithm where users can influence the order in which skyline objects are produced. Eventually the entire skyline is calculated, but at every stage of the computation users can provide a direction where most relevant objects might be expected. The work in [7] also relies on user interaction by presenting the user with a representative sample of the expected skyline set, and then exploiting user feedback to elicit an appropriate utility function for the final result ranking. [20] proposes to cover the skyline set with ε-spheres where each center of a sphere is a representative for all skyline objects within a distance of at most ε. This set of representatives is subsequently returned to the user. However, the computation of an ε-sphere cover was shown to be NP-hard for more than 2 independent predicates. Moreover, the calculation of such approximations always needs expensive computations of the entire skyline. These approaches only focus on total-order preferences: all objects can be compared in each predicate, which makes combinations of different predicates simple. Due to the indifference property in partial order preferences the Pareto combination leads to even bigger result sets: if an object is incomparable to other objects with respect to just a single preference, it still is Pareto-optimal and thus part of the skyline, even if it is the least preferred object with respect to all other preferences. In practical applications such incomparability often occurs: users can be indifferent between items and very rarely model preference relations between all possible attribute values for a query predicate anyway.

Recent research has started to combat such indifference in partial order preferences by means of defining classes of incomparable values that can nevertheless be considered equivalent. The 'substitute values' (SV) semantics in [18] assigns equal usefulness to all those incomparable values that share exactly the same ancestor and descendant nodes in the partial order preference. It can be shown that adding these equivalences always lead to a transitive aggregated Pareto order. On the other hand this semantics only remedies a small number of cases and is comparable in size and evaluation time to the complete Pareto skyline, c.f. [3]. In contrast, the work in [3] proposes so-called 'customized Pareto aggregation' where users are enabled to interactively specify arbitrary equivalences between incomparable objects in a more personalized fashion.

In this paper our goal is somewhat more ambitious. We want to efficiently provide representative subsets of the skyline that can be used in an interactive query process. These subsets have to be both manageable in size and representative of the Pareto skyline. In [4] we presented an innovative algorithm for the efficient computation of such subsets which relies on weak Pareto dominance, as defined in [2]. Weak Pareto dominance changes the preference semantics to an even higher degree than SV semantics or customized Pareto aggregation. The resulting 'restricted skyline', i.e., all objects not weakly Pareto dominated, contains intuitively appealing objects, can be derived surprisingly efficient, and thus will deliver our representative subsets. Moreover, by assessing the individual performance of the objects in the restricted skyline we can now even derive a more concise set, which we call 'focused skyline'. The contribution of our approach is therefore threefold:

- Restricted skylines derive manageable subsets of the partial order skylines (useful e.g. as a preview, or for query refinement) by taming the effects of incomparability. Our evaluation shows that sizes of restricted skylines are usually lean and manageable.
- Building on our work in [4] we can efficiently approximate these restricted skylines (including only few false positives, but never false negatives) without having to compute the entire Pareto set first. Query processing relies on progressive iteration of ranked result lists for each predicate and allows for pruning.
- Focused skylines consider only a concise subset of the restricted skyline where objects show a good performance in terms of the relaxation necessary in the respective predicates and the consistency of performance. Our algorithm for deriving the focused skyline from our approximated restricted skyline is computationally inexpensive and will be correct (in particular, it never contains false positives).



color	type
black	coupé
blue	SUV
green	roadster
pink	limousine
yellow	truck

database instance

Figure 1 Partial order preference example

In the following we will give a motivating scenario for partial order skylines and explain the semantics of the restricted and focused skyline sets. We will present the efficient evaluation algorithm for restricted and focused skylines and perform extensive experiments to prove their practical applicability.

2 Weak Pareto Dominance and Restricted Skylines

The following example will illustrate Pareto skylines and lead to the basic notion of weak Pareto dominance.

Example 1: Given preferences P1 on car types and P2 on colors in Figure 1 and the following database instance: a green roadster, a black coupé, a blue SUV, a yellow truck and a pink limousine. None of them are dominated. The green roadster is maximal in P_1. It does not dominate the black coupé, because black color is preferred over green. Furthermore, the user is indifferent between black and blue cars, thus the blue SUV is not dominated by the black coupe, nor dominated by the green roadster because of P_2. Though the yellow truck has the worst car type, the user has not given any judgment on its color, thus making it incomparable. Finally, the pink limousine is completely incomparable to all other objects. Thus, the Pareto skyline contains all five elements.

Using the normal definition of Pareto sets, in Example 1 the entire database would have to be retrieved and returned to the user. Since a user usually is interested in refining queries according to the most promising result objects, retrieving a sophisticated selection from the skyline is a far more cooperative behavior. Our restricted skyline is such a selection. But on what grounds can we select 'better' objects from the full Pareto skyline?

Generally speaking, skyline queries are only sensible if no ordering or weightings between individual predicates are provided. Otherwise utility-based ranking schemes such as top-*k* queries would be far more efficient to use. Pareto sets are designed to consist of all optimal objects with respect to all possible utility functions. Therefore, selecting a subset of the skyline will always ignore objects that are nevertheless optimal for some utility function. In other words, any selection will consider some

utility functions as being more probable than others. Such an assessment has to be based on heuristics. We rely on the heuristic that all user preferences should be relaxed evenly and as little as possible, i.e. the relaxation scheme should be fair. In any case, a selection doesn't have to be the final result set. If it can be computed reasonably fast and yields manageable result sets, it can also be used as a good starting point for focused searches such as the online algorithm in [21] or the feedback algorithm in [7]. Since our selection relies on weak Pareto dominance, we will formalize its semantics in the following definition (cf. Pareto composition in [12]):

Definition 1: (weak Pareto dominance)
Let O be a set of database objects and $x, y \in O$. An object x is said to *weakly dominate* object y with respect to partial order preferences $P_1, \ldots, P_n$, if and only if there is an index i $(1 \leq i \leq n)$ such that x dominates y with respect to P_i and there is no index j $(1 \leq j \leq n)$ such that y dominates x with respect to P_i. That means, with $>_P$ denoting the domination with respect to partial order P:

x weakly dominates y $\Leftrightarrow \exists\, i\ (1 \leq i \leq n)$: $x >_{Pi} y \wedge \neg\exists\, j\ (1 \leq j \leq n)$: $y >_{Pj} x$

Partial order preferences as given by a user often comprise only a small fraction of a value domain. Due to incomparability, all values not explicitly occurring in the preference graph are maximal with respect to the partial order, but not connected to the preference graph. Therefore, we call them *isolated maxima.* However, usually a user omits these values not to denote that he prefers them, but to denote that he has no interest in them. Therefore, we additionally exclude objects with isolated maximum values in all dimensions from the skyline defined by weak Pareto dominance:

Definition 2: (restricted skyline)

Let NW the set of all non-weakly-dominated objects the 'restricted' skyline, and IM the set of objects having isolated maximum values in all preferences. Then the restricted skyline is $RS = NW \setminus IM$.

Please note that for total order preferences, weak and strong Pareto dominance coincide, because there are no incomparable objects. Let us reconsider our example and see what changes, if we restrict the skyline set according to Definition 2.

Example 1 (cont.): Consider the objects from above under the notion of weak Pareto dominance (Figure 2). There is still no weak dominance relation between the green roadster, and the black coupé, because black color is preferred to green, but a roadster is deemed better than a coupé. However, both of them now weakly dominate

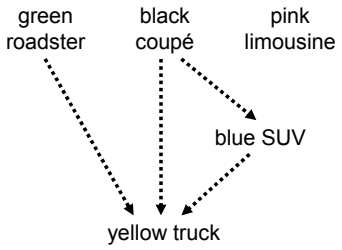


Figure 2 Sample weak dominance graph

the yellow truck and it can be removed in the restricted skyline. Removing the yellow truck seems indeed a very intuitive thing to do, because P_1 tells us that everything is better than a truck and the user, although voicing explicit color preferences, did not express his/her opinions on yellow cars. Moreover, we have to take a closer look at the relation between the black coupé and the blue SUV. The user is indifferent between both colors. But the black coupé fits his/her car type wishes to a higher degree, hence is probably more desirable. The weak dominance relation reflects this semantics: the blue SUV is weakly dominated by the black coupé and can be removed. Please note that the pink limousine with incomparable predicate values with respect to all preferences is still not (weakly) dominated by anything. However, we can see from the preferences that the user did not state any opinion on pink cars or on limousine car types, i.e., the pink limousine fulfills none of the user's wishes. Hence, if the yellow truck is removed from the restricted skyline, it is even more sensible to remove the pink limousine. This is reflected by the treatment of isolated maximum values in deriving the restricted skyline.

In the end, the result size in our small example is more than halved and only less intuitive candidates have been pruned. Our work in [2] shows that restricted skylines are a proper subset of the normal skyline, i.e. the strong Pareto set. The same applies to the substitute values skyline, as shown in [18]. Finally, it can be shown that the restricted skyline is always a subset of the SV-skyline.

3 Efficiently Computing Restricted Skylines

Unlike numerical skylines, any partial order algorithm needs to handle object incomparability. This makes algorithms on total orders (such as NN [21] and BBS [24]) unsuitable. In contrast we rely on a scheme using topologically ordered lists: for each query predicate a list of all database objects sorted according to the respective user preference is created. Incomparability can be resolved by exploiting the level order of the preference. The algorithm's main challenge is to determine, if all relevant objects have already been seen. In each query evaluation our algorithm therefore first computes possible value combinations (so-called *l*-cuts), which guarantee

safe pruning: if a set of objects instantiate any *l*-cut no relevant object can exist in the tails (higher than level *l*) of the sorted lists. The creation of the sorted lists and the calculation of the pruning thresholds are only dependent on preference size, not on database size, and therefore fast to compute.

3.1 Level Order for Partial Order Preferences

For pruning, we have to arrange for sorted access to objects for each query predicate: possibly relevant objects should be returned earlier than rather irrelevant objects. To create a proper sorting from the given partial preference orders, we use a simple breadth first topological ordering defining 'levels':

Definition 3: (level order)
Let P be a partial order preference. A value v is said to *belong to level* l or $level(v) = l$ with respect to P, if and only if the longest path from any maximum attribute value in P to v consists of $(l - 1)$ edges. Values not explicitly expressed in P (isolated maxima) are given the level $max(level(v)) + 1$. We denote the set of all values in level l as $level_l := \{v \mid level(v) = l\}$.

Analogously, a database object x is said to be in level l with respect to P, iff its attribute value is in level l.

This notion of levels imposes an intuitive sorting: all maximum (i.e. non-dominated) objects of P are on level 1, all objects that are only dominated in P by maximum objects are on level 2, and so on. We call this order *level order*. In the special case of numerical or total order preferences the level corresponds to each object's rank, if objects with identical scores/attribute values are considered to have equal rank. But for partial orders this level order has another nice property:

Lemma 1: (level order domination)
Let O be a set of database objects and $x, y \in O$. Then object x can only dominate object y with respect to a partial order preference P, if $level(x) < level(y)$ with respect to P.

Proof: If x dominates y there is a path of length $q > 0$ from x to y in P. Thus it directly follows from the definition of levels by longest paths in Definition 3, that: $level(x) < level(x) + q \leq level(y)$. ■

Though objects can only be dominated by objects in smaller levels, due to the partial order semantics they do not *have to* be dominated by all objects in these levels, but can also be incomparable. For example, blue cars are in a smaller level than grey cars for our preference P_2, although both are incomparable (see Figure 3). In the following we will assume all database objects to be accessed in level order for each preference.

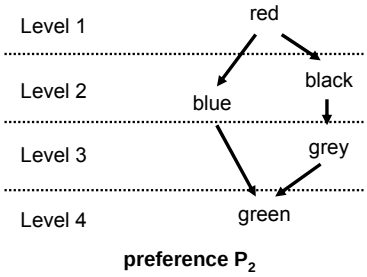


Figure 3 Level order example

Note that it is not necessary to compute a complete object index based on the level order for each incoming query. Instead, the database maintains object sets clustered by value, i.e., the sets of objects sharing the same value for a predicate. Then, creating a list in level order just means to sort references to these sets, not to sort all database objects. Since user preferences are typically rather small, producing level orders is fast even for large databases.

3.2 Identifying the Pruning Thresholds

In the last section we have defined a sorted list of objects for each predicate. For pruning we introduce the concept of *l*-cuts. While iterating over the lists, we have to check whether all relevant (i.e. not weakly dominated) objects have been accessed already.

Definition 4: (*l*-cut of preference orders)
For a partial order preference P and natural number l, a subset of values $C \subseteq P$ is called *l-cut,* if

(a) $\forall\, v \in C : level(v) \leq l$

(b) $\forall\, (w \in P \backslash C)\ \exists\, v \in C : v >_P w$

A set of database objects D forms an instance of an *l*-cut C if for each $v \in C\ \exists\, o \in D$: o has attribute value v. An *l*-cut C is *minimal*, if no subset $C' \subset C$ is an *l*-cut.

The intuitive meaning of *l*-cuts is to form sets of attribute values that if instantiated by database objects, dominate all object values beyond the *l*-th level. Every completely instantiated level of values forms a trivial *l*-cut. But generally *l*-cuts will be much smaller, and in the following we only need to consider minimum *l*-cuts.

Example 1 (cont.): Every single red car is instance of a 1-cut with respect to P_2. A 2-cut is instantiated by any pair of a blue and a black car. Regarding preference P_1, every roadster is instance of the 1-cut, every coupé instantiates a 2-cut, and so on.

For efficient pruning in our skyline evaluation we have to allow for quick tests whether a set of objects instantiating an l-cut has already been accessed. Hence, our first step in query evaluation is to compute all minimal l-cuts for each preference dimension. If we later find some object set instantiating any such cut we have found a pruning threshold. We now present a simple way to calculate minimal l-cuts. We first split the preference graph into levels, according to Definition 3:

Algorithm 1 (calculating attribute value levels)

0. Select $level_1$ as the set of all maximum attribute values in a preference graph P, i.e. all attribute values that are not dominated by any other attribute value. $l := 1$
1. $level_{l+1} := \emptyset$
2. While there are attribute values in $level_l$ do
   - 2.1. Consider the next attribute value x in $level_l$
   - 2.2. For each attribute value y directly dominated by attribute value x with respect to P do
     - 2.2.1. If $y \notin level_0 \cup \ldots \cup level_{l+1}$, then $level_{l+1} := level_{l+1} \cup \{y\}$
     - 2.2.2. If $y \in level_j$ for some $j \leq l$, then remove y from $level_j$ and set $level_{l+1} := level_{l+1} \cup \{y\}$
3. If $level_{l+1}$ is not empty, set $l := l+1$ and proceed with step 1.

From these level sets, we can now determine minimal l-cuts. Obviously, each complete set $level_l$ is a cut candidate, because all objects having attribute values in $level_j$ with $l < j$ are dominated by some object having an attribute value from set $level_l$. Moreover, if we replace some cut element by any object dominating that cut element, the resulting set still forms a cut. Thus, to find all possible cut candidate value sets, we have to systematically enumerate all possible replacements. For this purpose, we first build a cut candidate value set from each complete $level_l$ and then exhaustively replace attribute values by dominating values. Finally we remove redundant values to identify minimal cuts.

Algorithm 2 (calculating minimal cut value sets)

0. Given n sets of attribute values $level_1, \ldots, level_n$ as output by algorithm 1 and initialize $candidates_1, \ldots, candidates_n := \emptyset$, $replace_1, \ldots, replace_n := \emptyset$ and $minimalcuts_1, \ldots, minimalcuts_n := \emptyset$.
1. For $l := 1$ to n do
   - 1.1. If $level_l \notin candidates_l$ then $candidates_l := candidates_l \cup \{level_l\}$
   - 1.2. For $j := 1$ to $|level_l|$ do
     - 1.2.1. Consider the j-th attribute value a_i in an enumeration of $level_l$ and initialize $replace_j := a_i$
     - 1.2.2. For each y with $a_i <_P y$ and $y \notin replace_i$ do $replace_i := replace_i \cup \{y\}$
   - 1.3. Generate all possible combinations $\{x_1, \ldots, x_{|level\ l|}\}$ with $x_l \in replace_l$ and in each combination remove redundant attribute values, i.e. duplicates and values dominated by another value in the set. $candidates_l := candidates_l \cup \{x_1, \ldots, x_{|level\ l|}\}$
   - 1.4. Consider all candidate sets $cand$ in $candidates_l$ and if no subset of $cand$ is in $candidates_l$, $mincuts_l := mincuts_l \cup \{cand\}$

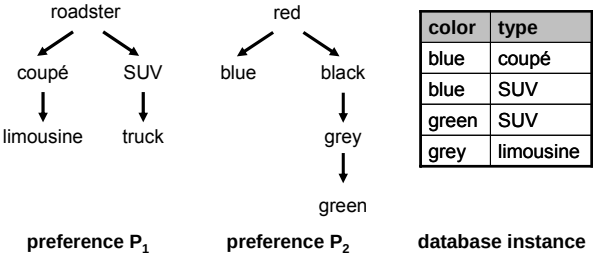


Figure 4 False positives due to pruning

Algorithm 2 is exponential in the size of the partial order preference. However, this size is typically rather small, and l-cut computation is always independent of the actual database size. Therefore, query processing efficiency is dominated by the actual skyline computation described in the next subsection. Please not that we nevertheless include the cost of the minimal l-cut computations in the query processing times in all our experiments.

3.3 Correctly Pruning Database Objects

In each preference we identified all minimal l-cuts. Now we are ready to present a way for pruning irrelevant parts of the database without missing elements of the restricted skyline. This is the major component needed to build an efficient evaluation algorithm for partial order preference queries under the weak Pareto dominance paradigm. The following theorem will show a sufficient condition to correctly prune database objects:

Theorem 1: (absence of false negatives after pruning) Let O be a set of database objects and $S_1, \ldots, S_n$ be level-ordered lists of O with respect to partial order preferences $P_1, \ldots, P_n$. Let $o_1, \ldots, o_k \in O$ and assume that $o_1, \ldots, o_k$ have already been accessed in all level ordered lists and $\{o_1, \ldots, o_k\}$ form an l-cut with respect P_i for some numbers i and l. Then no object that for all $1 \leq j \leq n$ occurs on a higher level than l in S_i can be part of the restricted skyline.

Proof: Let $\{o_1, \ldots, o_k\}$ be as defined above and $u \in O$ be an object that has not yet been accessed in any P_i ($1 \leq j \leq n$). For the sake of contradiction we will assume that ob-

ject u belongs to the restricted skyline set, i.e. it is not weakly dominated by any other object. Since $\{o_1,\ldots, o_k\}$ form an l-cut in P_i, u has to be dominated by some object o_m ($1 \le m \le k$) with respect to P_i. Because we have assumed u to be not weakly dominated by any object, there has to be at least one preference where u dominates o_m Since o_m has already been accessed in all P_j and u has not yet been accessed with respect to any P_i, its level $level_i(u) \ge level_i(o_m)$. Now according to Lemma 1 u cannot dominate o_m in any preference and thus must be weakly dominated. This contradicts the assumption of u being part of the restricted skyline. ■

Now we know that unseen objects can never be part of the restricted skyline and can be correctly pruned after we have a completely known set of objects that instantiates an l-cut. Unfortunately, due to the intransitivity of weak Pareto dominance, in some rare cases an unseen object could still weakly dominate a member of the restricted skyline candidate set, thus resulting in a false positive.

Example 3: Given preferences P_1 on car types and P_2 on colors in Figure 4 and the following database instance: a blue coupé, a blue SUV, a green SUV and a grey limousine. Let us assume that we have iterated over the sorted lists up to level 2 in each preference, i.e. we have seen all roadsters, coupés and SUVs and all red, blue and black cars. Given the database instance, we have accessed the blue coupé, blue SUV and green SUV. Moreover the first two items have been accessed in both preferences and form a 2-cut with respect to P_1. Following theorem 1 we can now prune all remaining objects, i.e. the grey limousine. This pruning is indeed correct, since the grey limousine is weakly dominated by the blue coupé. But whereas neither the blue coupé, nor the blue SUV dominate the green SUV, it is dominated by the pruned grey limousine and thus a false positive in the restricted skyline set.

As we can see from Example 2, preference graphs where such false positives can occur have to consist of long isolated branches and the database instance should be rather sparse on top objects. In fact, finding these conditions in all preferences is very unlikely (cf. Section 5.7).

3.4 Efficiently Approximating the Restricted Skyline

For computing the correct restricted skyline we have to

- derive the Pareto skyline,
- test all elements against all other database objects for weak Pareto dominance, and
- finally remove all weakly dominated objects.

However, this is very inefficient since for Pareto skyline computation with partial order preferences usually all database objects have to be accessed (for example on a database with only 500,000 tuples and 5 partial order preferences calculating the Pareto skyline takes about 22 minutes). Exploiting sorted lists and the pruning condition defined in section 3, in the following algorithm we will take a few false positives into account. However, in return we may prune large parts of the database and thus get an efficient query processing, while still always correctly deriving all objects of the restricted skyline (for example calculating the approximate restricted skyline in the same scenario and setting as above takes only 35 seconds).

Algorithm 3: (approx. restricted skyline computation)

0. Given a set of database objects O and a query containing n partial order preferences $P_1,\ldots, P_n$; given a set of n sorted lists $S_1,\ldots, S_n$ of O with respect to $P_1,\ldots,P_n$ in level order.
   - 0.1. Initialize a set for all accessed objects *accessed* := ∅, sets for all objects accessed in the n lists $accessed_1,\ldots, accessed_n$:= ∅, a set for all objects already accessed with respect to all preferences *complete* := ∅, and a set for all objects currently under consideration *current* := ∅.
   - 0.2. Compute all sets of minimal cuts $mincuts_{i,l}$ for the $1 \le i \le n$ preferences and $1 \le l \le maxlevel_i$ levels, using Algorithms 1 and 2.
   - 0.3. Initialize a counter for the levels l := 1, for the current preference i := 1.
1. If none of the preferences $P_1,\ldots,P_n$ has an l-th level, then return ∅ as the restricted skyline and terminate. If preference P_i has no l-th level, proceed with step 4.
2. Get all attribute values of level l for the i-th preference P_i and iterate over list S_i retrieving all objects having any of these attribute values into the set *current*.
3. If *current* ≠ ∅ then
   - 3.1. $accessed_i := accessed_i \cup current$ and *accessed* := *accessed* ∪ *current*
   - 3.2. *complete* := $accessed_1 \cap \ldots \cap accessed_n$
   - 3.3. If there exists some set of objects $C \subseteq complete$ such that the respective set of i-th attribute values of the objects in C is equal to some element of $mincuts_{i,l}$, i.e. the objects in C instantiate an l-cut with respect to P_i and have already been accessed in all lists $S_1,\ldots, S_n$, do
     - 3.3.1. For $j := i+1$ to n do get all attribute values of level l for the j-th preference P_i (if level l exists in P_j) and iterate over list S_i. Union all objects having any of these attribute values with the sets $accessed_i$ and *accessed* like in step 3.1.
     - 3.3.2. *complete* := $accessed_1 \cap \ldots \cap accessed_n$
     - 3.3.3. Compare all objects from set *accessed* pairwise for weak domination and subse-

quently remove all weakly dominated objects from set *accessed*.

3.3.4. Return the set *accessed* as the restricted skyline and terminate.

4. If $i < n$, then set $i := i+1$, else set $i := 1$ and $l := l+1$. Set *current* := ∅ and proceed with step 1.

Basically the algorithm iterates over the preference information in a round robin fashion. It considers all objects that form a level in a preference. Of course instead of using sorted lists, all objects with a certain attribute value could also be retrieved using a database index (step 2). The algorithm then checks if an *l*-cut has been instantiated by completely known objects on the current level, and – if not – proceeds to process the next preference. Whenever a round is complete, it proceeds to the next level. If an *l*-cut has been instantiated by completely known objects, the current level is completed in all preferences and all higher levels are pruned (which is correct according to Theorem 1). The algorithm then checks for weak dominations and removes all dominated objects.

4 Focusing on Objects with Best Performance

We may want to decrease skyline sizes even more, by focusing only on objects with best performance that consistently meet the user's preferences with only small deviations. For having a good performance, an object has to be retrieved with only a minimum and rather similar number of relaxation steps in the Hasse diagram of each individual preference [6]. That means, on top of not being weakly dominated, objects need to have best possible combinations of attribute values on preferably high levels in all user preferences. They have to have a rather good consistency of performance, i.e. cannot afford any outliers even in a single preference. The result is a limited set of pairwise incomparable objects according to a fair relaxation scheme. We will refer to this highly consistent subset of the restricted skyline as 'focused skyline'. Let us come back to our example in Section 2 to illustrate this concept.

Example 1 (cont.):
Again take the objects from Figure 2 under the notion of weak Pareto dominance. The restricted skyline still consists of two objects, the green roadster and the black coupé. Whereas the green roadster needs a lot of relaxation in the color preference, the black coupé shows a superior and quite consistent overall performance. Thus in the focused skyline we will skip the green roadster, and return only the black coupé as best choice.

Here, the concept of minimal relaxation takes into account the levels on which the attribute values of an object occur in each preference. It measures their distance to best possible values and ignores how these attribute values are interlinked to other parts of the preference graph. Moreover, intuitively for users the most important part of the skyline are rather consistent objects without outliers, but usually not the objects being only part of the skyline due to some incomparability. Hence, the focused skyline indeed selects all best performing objects without outliers from the restricted skyline.

To determine the overall necessary amount of relaxation, we rely on the distances between an object's actual attribute values and the respective optimal values. For each object, this distance varies for different preferences. First, we identify the worst distance for each object of the restricted skyline. Then, by choosing the minimum over all worst distances, we get a threshold determining the minimum necessary relaxation for any object. For all focused skyline objects we restrict the permissible distance between actual and optimal value in any preference to the worst distance of this object with the overall minimal maximum relaxation with respect to all preferences. In the following, we use the respective level difference as distance function. Of course, other distance functions may be used as well, such as functions that assign different weights to individual relaxation steps in each preference. The definition of the focused skyline then has to be changed accordingly, but all results hold for monotonic distance functions.

Example 1 (cont.):
Let us illustrate the concept of best performance with two objects of our sample database, the green roadster and the black coupé.

- Consider the green roadster: with respect to colors, the distance of its green color to the optimal red color is 3. With respect to car types, the distance is 0. Its minimal maximum distance thus is 3.
- For the black coupé, the distance of black color to the optimal red color is 1, as is the distance between car type coupé and the optimal roadster. Its minimal maximum distance thus is 1.

The performance of the black coupé is also far more consistent. In fact, if these two objects would comprise the restricted skyline, then the black coupé would determine the threshold for permissible relaxation as 1. Based on this threshold and our above definition, the green roadster would not be selected for the focused skyline, as intended.

Let us now give a formal definition of focused skylines. As prerequisite, we first extend the *l*-cut concept for individual partial order preferences to 'regular' *l*-cuts for the complete set of preferences:

Definition 5: (regular *l*-cut for a set of preferences)
Let O be a set of database objects and $S_1,\ldots,S_n$ be enumerations of O in level order with respect to partial order preferences $P_1,\ldots,P_n$. Then a subset $C \subseteq O$ is called a *regular l-cut* with respect to P_i, if
(a) C is l-cut for preference P_i $(1 \leq i \leq n)$
(b) $\forall\ o \in C$: $level(o) \geq l$ with respect to all preferences $P_1,\ldots,P_n$.

Actually, this definition was already instantiated implicitly in step 3.3 of algorithm 3 in the termination condition: the algorithm terminates as soon as a regular l-cut is found. Using this concept, we now define focused skylines:

Definition 6: (focused skyline)
Let l be the minimum level for which some regular l-cut exists, and R the set of all not weakly dominated objects. The *focused skyline* is defined as the set of objects $r \in R$ that have attribute values on level l or lower with respect to *each* individual preference.

As stated above we can generally restrict ourselves to minimal l-cuts only. The focused skyline contains the objects forming these l-cuts, but usually will feature some more objects. It will definitely contain all not dominated objects with a high consistency of performance and thus provide a high-quality selection of incomparable best objects.

4.1 Correctly Pruning Database Objects for the Focused Skyline

The computation of focused skylines is quite similar to evaluating restricted skylines. Again, we present a way for pruning irrelevant parts of the database without missing elements of the focused skyline. Analogously to Theorem 1 for restricted skylines, the following theorem shows a sufficient condition to correctly prune database objects:

Theorem 2: (absence of false negatives after pruning)
Let O be a set of database objects, $S_1,\ldots, S_n$ be enumerations of O in level order with respect to partial order preferences $P_1,\ldots, P_n$. Given $o_1,\ldots, o_k \in O$ and let $\{o_1,\ldots, o_k\}$ form a regular l-cut with respect P_i for some natural number l. Then no object that for all j occurs on a higher level than l in S_j (or is completely incomparable to other objects with respect to P_j) can be part of the focused skyline.

Proof: The proof is similar to Theorem 1. Let $\{o_1,\ldots, o_k\}$ be as defined above and $u \in O$ be an object with $level(u) > l$ with respect to P_j $(1 \leq j \leq n)$ or completely incomparable in P_j. For the sake of contradiction we will assume that object u belongs to the restricted skyline set, i.e. it is not weakly dominated by any other object. Since $\{o_1,\ldots, o_k\}$ form a l-cut in P_i, u has to be dominated by some object o_k $(1 \leq k \leq n)$ with respect to P_i. Because we have assumed u to be not weakly dominated by any object, there has to be at least one preference where u dominates o_k. Since o_k is part of a regular l-cut, its minimum level with respect to any preference is l, whereas either the level of u is higher then l, or it is incomparable to o_k in every P_i. In both cases, either according to lemma 1, or according to its incomparability, u cannot dominate o_k. This contradicts the assumption of u being part of the restricted skyline and (being a subset) also the focused skyline. ■

In the case of focused skylines, we can even show a stronger result: the absence of false positives. For this, we have to prove that no unseen object can weakly dominate a member of the focused skyline.

Theorem 3: (absence of false positives after pruning)

Let O be a set of database objects, $S_1,\ldots, S_n$ be enumerations of O in level order with respect to partial order preferences $P_1,\ldots, P_n$. Assume that a regular l-cut for some natural number l has been accessed in either preference. Given object $o \in O$ of the focused skyline and some object $u \in O$ with either $level(u) > l$, or u is completely incomparable to other objects with respect to every preference, then u cannot weakly dominate o.

Proof: The proof is straightforward: according to Definition 6 all objects in the focused skyline show a high performance, i.e. all their attribute values are on levels smaller or equal to l. In order to dominate o object u would have to strictly dominate it with respect to at least a single preference. Then, for that preference $level(u) > l \geq level(o)$ holds. Thus, u cannot dominate o according to Lemma 1. ■

Theorem 3 shows that even without the transitivity of the weak dominance relation, objects with high performance can be weakly dominated only by already accessed objects. Thus, with Theorems 2 and 3 we now can correctly prune all database objects that play no part in deriving the focused skyline.

The algorithm used for evaluation is nearly the same as Algorithm 3 for restricted skylines. The only difference is that in 3.4.4, we return only the intersection ($accessed \cap complete$) instead of the set *accessed*, containing all accessed objects. As our evaluation will show, by introducing a bias on objects with best performance, the focused skyline is significantly smaller, however not as representative as the restricted skyline.

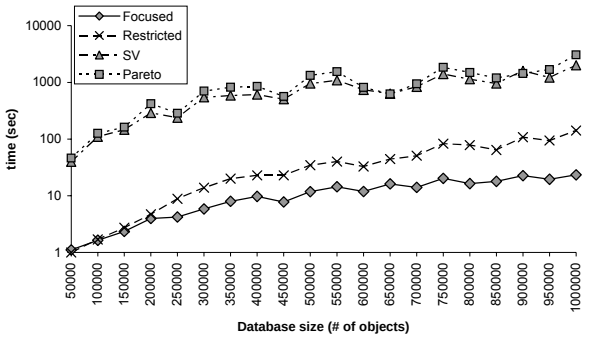


Figure 5 Database size effect on runtime

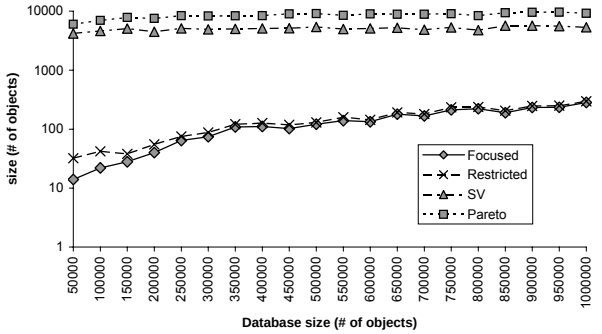


Figure 6 Database size effect on skyline size

5 Evaluation

To evaluate the performance of our algorithm and compare skyline sizes, we conducted extensive experiments with various parameter settings. To avoid bias, both data and preferences are synthesized randomly, and we show averages over multiple runs in our evaluation. The database content is generated according to several different distributions. Preferences are generated based on several parameters:

- *Preference size*. The number of attribute values in a preference.
- *Preference depth*. The number of levels in the preference graph (cf. Definition 3).
- *Edge ratio*. The ratio between nodes and edges in the preference graph, i.e. the average node degree.

We evaluated different scenarios to study the influence of these parameters. In all scenarios, we measured the time required to compute the skylines (runtimes) and the skyline sizes for the restricted skyline, focused skyline, substitute values (SV) skyline and Pareto skyline. For restricted skyline computation, we use the algorithm described in Section 3. For all other skylines, we need to do a pair-wise object comparison for all object pairs. The BBS+ or SDC+ algorithms described in [10] may yield better runtime results for the Pareto skyline case. However, the experiments in [10] show results only for queries including 1 or 2 partially ordered preferences, and due to the underlying R-Tree indexing structure performance is bound to suffer for higher-dimensional skyline queries.

Table 1: Default evaluation settings

Parameter	Value
Database size	25000
Data distribution	Uniform
Number of preferences	5
Preference size	15
Preference depth	5
Edge ratio	1.2

Table 1 shows our default configuration used as baseline setting. In all experiments, parameters not explicitly mentioned are set to these default values. We ran all experiments on a 2.4 GHz AMD Opteron64 Dual-processor Linux machine, equipped with 20GB main memory. The algorithm is not (yet) parallelized, therefore only one processor was actually used. Memory consumption was not regularly captured. We only measured it for the largest database size (1 million objects), where the computation of restricted skylines required 811MB.

In the next sections, we describe each experiment and its outcome in detail. Please note that we always use a logarithmic scale for both time and size to suit the large differences between skyline types.

5.1 Influence of database size

To determine the influence of the database size in terms of our algorithm's scalability, we varied the number of database objects between 50.000 and 1.000.000. Restricted and focused skylines are in all cases computed by about two orders of magnitude faster than SV and Pareto skylines (see Figure 5). In absolute figures, runtimes for Pareto skylines of more than 15 minutes on a powerful server can hardly be considered practical. Our algorithm can compute the skyline about two orders of magnitude faster. The dominant operations are pair-wise object comparisons which proceed for each object until a) a dominating object is found or b) the object has been compared to all others. Due to the weakened domination definition case a) occurs much more frequently in our approach. Additionally, on average far fewer comparisons are required until a dominating object is found. Figure 6 shows that the restricted skyline size starts very small (32 for 50.000 objects) and stays manageable even

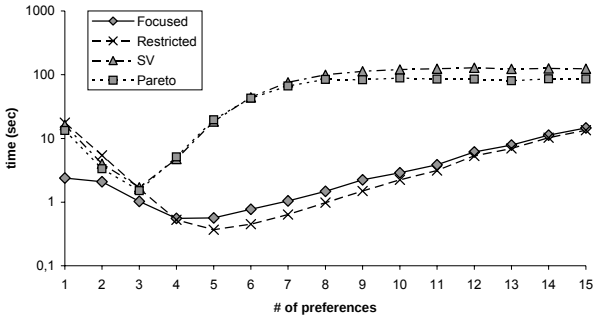


Figure 7 Preference dimensionality effect on runtime

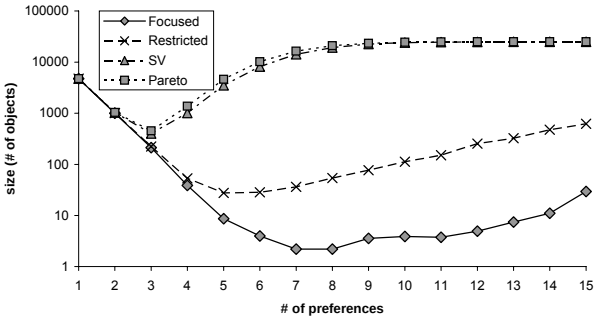


Figure 8 Preference dimensionality effect on skyline size

for large databases (297 for 1 million objects). The same applies to the focused skyline. In contrast, SV and Pareto skylines always comprise several thousand objects, already an unacceptable size for practical usage, e.g., in query refinement or relevance feedback. In summary, our proposed skyline algorithm scales well in terms of computation and skyline size.

5.2 Influence of query dimensionality

The goal in this scenario was to see how the number of preferences specified in a query affects skylines. After a small decrease in skyline sizes for 2-3 dimensions (where domination relationships are not yet outweighed by incomparability between the growing number of possible pairs of dimensions), the SV and Pareto skylines are touched by the curse of dimensionality. Like comparable work shows: their sizes quickly increase significantly up to nearly the whole database. On the other hand, the restricted skyline size only increases slightly, and the focused skyline stays lean even for high-dimensional skylines (see Figure 8). But what is more, even for large numbers of preferences both are still computed about an order of magnitude faster than SV and Pareto skylines, as shown in Figure 7. We can state that the weak dominance approach makes interactive refinement or feedback in high-dimensional skyline querying practical.

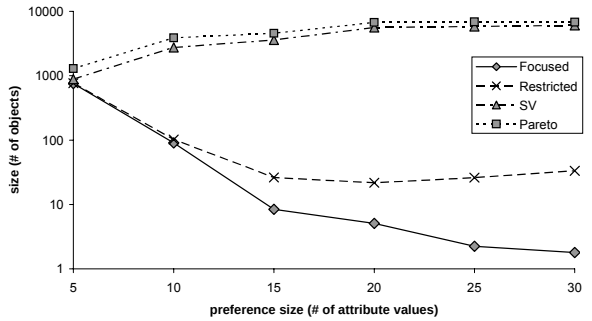


Figure 9 Influence of preference size on skyline size

5.3 Influence of preference size and shape

In this experiment, we varied the preference size between 5 and 30 attribute values. Figure 9 shows that between 5 to 20 attribute values, SV and Pareto skyline sizes grow up to 20%, rsp. 25% of the database. Further increase of preference sizes doesn't show a significant impact on skyline sizes. In contrast, the restricted skyline shrinks to a minimum at preference sizes of 20, and then stays fairly constant. Also focused skyline sizes nicely shrink with increasing preference sizes.

For preference depth, we see a different picture (Figure 10). Pareto and SV skyline shrink notably when increasing depth from 2 to 15. This happens due to the reduction of incomparable attribute values. For depth 15, we already get a linear dominance order, without any incomparable value pairs left. For this case, Pareto, SV, and restricted skylines becomes identical, since weak and strong dominance coincide. From a depth of 5 on, the size of the focused skyline stays constantly below 10.

5.4 Influence of skewed data distribution

For our next set of experiments, we changed the distribution of our data collection. Using the Zipf distribution

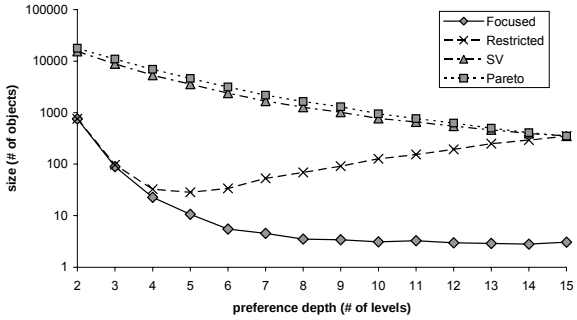


Figure 10 Influence of preference depth on skyline size

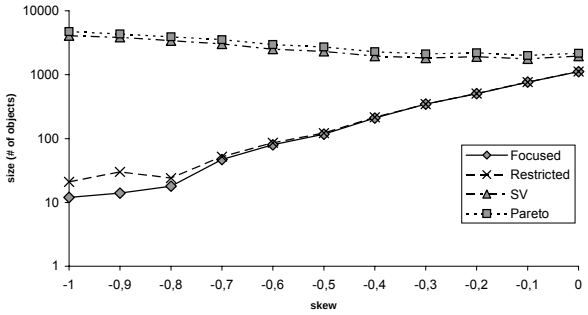


Figure 12 Zipf skew effect on skyline size

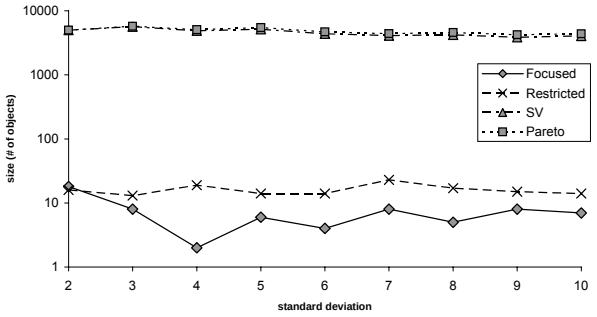


Figure 11 Gaussian distribution effect on skyline size

$$f(k) = \frac{k^{-1+s}}{\sum_{i=1}^{N} i^{-1+s}},$$

where N is the preference size and s the distribution skew, we varied the skew from uniform (s=-1.0) to highly skewed (s=0.0). In the latter case, the most preferred attribute values in each preference is already assumed by 14% of all database objects. As we can see in Figure 12, with growing skew the different skyline types coincide more and more. With so many objects having top attribute values, the chance for incomparability gets lower, and a set of rather similar top objects is bound to dominate the whole rest of the database. Similar effects can be observed when shifting the head of the Zipf distribution to the least preferred objects, thus creating a multitude of overall bad objects. In both cases, restricted and focused skylines are computed an order of magnitude faster than the Pareto skyline.

5.5 Influence of Gaussian data distribution

Finally, we investigated the influence of Gaussian data distribution on skylines. Varying the standard deviation, we measured sizes and runtimes. This distribution encourages the creation of objects with medium preferred attribute values in all preferences. As Figure 11 shows, the restricted and focused skyline size constantly stays about two orders of magnitude lower than in the Pareto and SV semantics case, independently of the standard deviation. Also here, the these skylines are computed about a magnitude faster than Pareto and SV skylines.

5.6 Coverage of Pareto by Restricted and Focused Skyline

To investigate how good the Pareto skyline is covered by the sdecreased skyline sets, i.e., how representative our selection from the original skyline set is, we performed a separate evaluation. We compared the coverage of the restricted and focused skyline over the full Pareto skyline with the coverage of a random sample of the Pareto skyline. As measure for coverage, we use the average minimum distance of all Pareto skyline points to the objects in the restricted skyline. Small average minimum distances show a good approximation of the original set. To calculate this measure, we select for each object in the Pareto skyline the nearest object of the restricted skyline, and compute their Euclidean distance. As we have no natural numeric distances, we use again the level order to translate preference differences to numeric difference: for each preference P, the object value v is replaced with the numeric value $v' = level_P(v) / maxlevel_P$. The same measure is used to compute the coverage of an equally large random sample of the Pareto skyline. Such a random sample can bee seen as optimal regarding representativeness, with respect to its size. As shown in Figure 13, restricted and focused skylines exhibits nearly the same coverage as the random sample. This shows that weak Pareto dominance does not lead to a bias towards a specific area of the Pareto skyline.

5.7 Occurrence of False Positives

In all described settings, besides computing the restricted skyline according to Algorithm 3, we also computed it by exhaustive comparison of all database objects, to identify false positives. Even with our small edge ratio of 1.2, we did not encounter a single false positive. A closer look shows that it is indeed highly improbable to create prefer-

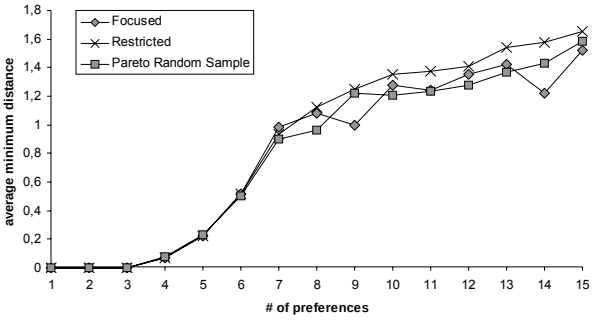


Figure 13 Average minimum distance

ence graphs with long isolated branches, while at the same time having a database instance where the values at dominating positions are not occupied by some object.

6 Summary and Conclusions

Although skylines on partial order domains gain importance in practical applications due to their intuitive query capabilities, their evaluation times and especially their large result set sizes are still hampering their usefulness in typical interactive tasks, such as query refinement or for providing relevance feedback. Therefore the concept of weak Pareto dominance has recently been introduced, allowing to derive the restricted skyline. Restricted skylines generally allow to retrieve only the best matching objects with respect to the user's preferences. Moreover, the relaxed semantics of restricted skylines usually lead to intuitive results.

For fast query processing, we designed an efficient evaluation algorithm to approximate restricted skylines. It iterates over object lists for each preference, topologically sorted according to the level order of the respective preference. Hence, our algorithm allows for the pruning of possibly large irrelevant chunks of the database with proven correctness. While the complete restricted skyline is retrieved, some false positives can theoretically occur in the approximation. However, our evaluation indicates that these cases are very rare, and the amount of false positives is negligible in practice.

Moreover, we defined the focused skyline as a highly selective subset of the restricted skyline biasing on objects that show the best performance, i.e. a minimum degree of necessary relaxation and a good consistency of performance with respect to all preferences. This set is even smaller than the restricted skyline, still quite representative (unbiased), and efficient to derive without having to compute the complete Pareto skyline. Thus, it can serve as a first overview over possible skyline objects that are good candidates for compromises fitting a user's individual set of preferences.

To quantify the practical impact of our approach, we performed extensive experiments. Varying preference characteristics and data distributions, our experiments show that restricted skylines are efficient to compute, as well as lean in size. Restricted and focused skylines can be computed generally up to two orders of magnitude less expensive than Pareto skylines and stay lean even in the face of growing database sizes. They are also significantly less prone to the curse of dimensionality in face of larger numbers of user-provided preferences. Moreover, compared to similar-sized, representative random samples of the original Pareto skyline, restricted skylines do not exhibit a significant bias.

In summary, restricted and focused skylines together with the proposed evaluation algorithm do indeed provide useful subsets of the original Pareto skyline to the user: efficient to compute, suitable for higher dimensions, and representative.

Our future work will focus on reconciling skyline computations with utility-based ranking schemes, at least up to a certain point. In that respect, our level-ordering and sorted object lists can be seen as a first step towards mappings from purely qualitative rankings to approximate utilities for characteristic attribute combinations.

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Wolf-Tilo Balke, since 2004 associate research director of L3S Research Center of University of Hannover. Before that he was a research fellow at the University of California at Berkeley, USA. He is a member of the Emmy-Noether-Program of the German Research Foundation. He has received his MS in mathematics and a PhD in computer science from University of Augsburg, Germany.

Ulrich Güntzer, since 1990 chair for databases and information systems at the University of Tübingen, Germany. He has received his PhD and Habilitation in the field of mathematics and since 1970 worked as professor at the University of Maryland, USA, Free University of Berlin, and Technical University of Munich, Germany.

Wolf Siberski, since 2005 project leader at L3S Research Center of University of Hannover. Before joining L3S as researcher in 2001, he worked as software architect and internal consultant in IT companies. He received his PhD in computer science from University of Hannover and his MS in computer science from University of Hamburg, Germany.