Claims:

1. A computer-implemented method of guiding a user during the construction of a search query in an attempt to locate an item of interest in a database of items, wherein the search index of the database is a hierarchical data structure that includes at least one aspect of the items in the database with the aspect having facets where the facets enumerate possible values of the aspect, the method including:

receiving a search query from a user;

building a search expression data structure according to the search query;

expanding the search expression data structure to determine the results for at least one facet available to refine the user's search query and presenting a representation of the results of the user's search query for the at least one facet to the user during development of the search query, thus providing guidance to the user regarding the existence of valid results for the at least one facet;

wherein, the search expression data structure includes logical OR operations and expanding the search expression data structure to determine the existence of valid results for the at least one facet includes automatically removing components in the search expression data structure of the search query including facets which correspond to the same aspect as the at least one facet in order to avoid generating incorrect results.

2. A computer-implemented method according to claim 1 wherein components in the search expression data structure of the search query that are removed include those components having facets for which the facet under consideration is a sibling within the family of facets that enumerate an aspect.

3. A computer-implemented method according to either claim 1 or claim 2 wherein the search expression data structure representing the set of possible values of a facet is a tree structure with each non-leaf node representing an aspect of an item and leaf nodes representing facets of items.

4. A computer-implemented method according to anyone of the preceding claims wherein the search expression data structure is operable to include any combination of logical AND, logical OR and/or logical NOT operations.

5. A computer-implemented method according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the search expression data structure is operable to include any combination of logical EXCLUSIVE OR operations.

6. A computer-implemented method according to any one of the preceding claims whereupon expanding the search expression data structure to determine the existence or otherwise of valid search results for a facet selectable as a refinement, the components of the search expression data structure for which results are already known are used in the determination of search results for the refinement facet rather than re-executing searches relating to those components of the search expression data structure.

7. A computer-implemented method according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the user is provided with a facility to remove previously entered refinements from the search query which effectively accommodates a "change of mind" facility as the user develops their search query.

8. A computer-implemented method according to any one of the preceding claims wherein during the determination of the presence or otherwise of valid facet refinements and presenting those to the user as guidance whilst developing their search query, a count value obtained for the valid refinements are also presented to the user.

9. A computer-implemented system to guide a user during the construction of a search query in an attempt to locate an item of interest in a database of items, wherein the search index of the database is a hierarchical data structure that includes at least one aspect of the items in the database with the aspect having facets where the facets enumerate possible values of the aspect, the system including:

at least one processor executing computer instruction code to receive a search query from a user;

at least one processor executing computer instruction code to build a search expression data structure according to the search query;

at least one processor executing computer instruction code to expand the search expression data structure to determine the results for at least one facet available to refine the user's search query, wherein the search expression data structure includes logical OR operations and expanding the search expression data structure includes

automatically removing components in the search expression data structure of the search query including facets which correspond to the same aspect as the at least one facet in order to avoid generating incorrect results; and

at least one processor executing computer instruction code to present a representation of the results of the user's search query for the at least one facet to the user during development of the search query, thus providing guidance to the user regarding the existence of valid results for the at least one facet.

10. A computer-implemented system according to claim 9 wherein components in the search expression data structure of the search query that are removed include those components having facets for which the facet under consideration is a sibling within the family of facets that enumerate an aspect.

11. A computer-implemented system according to either claim 9 or claim 10 wherein the search expression data structure representing the set of possible values of a facet is a tree structure with each non-leaf node representing an aspect of an item and leaf nodes representing facets of items.

12. A computer-implemented system according to any one of claims 9 to 11 wherein the search expression data structure is operable to include an combination of logical AND, logical OR, and/or logical NOT operations.

13. A computer-implemented system according to any one of claims 9 to 12 wherein the search expression data structure is operable to include any combination of logical EXCLUSIVE OR operations.

14. A computer-implemented system according to any one of claims 9 to 13 whereupon expanding the search expression data structure to determine the existence or otherwise of valid search results for a facet selectable as a refinement, the components of the search expression data structure which results are already known are used in the determination of search results for the refinement facet rather than re-executing searches relating to those components of the search expression data structure.

15. A computer-implemented system according to any one of claims 9 to 14 including at least one processor executing computer instruction code operable to allow the user to remove previously entered refinements from the search query effectively accommodating a "change of mind" facility as the user is developing their search query.

16. A computer-implemented system according to any one of claims 9 to 15 wherein determining the presence or otherwise of valid facet refinements and presenting those to the user as guidance whilst developing their search query, a count value obtained for the valid refinements are also presented to the user.

17. A computer instruction code which, when executed by one or more processors, effects the steps of any one or more of the methods defined in claims 1 to 8.