Building Scalable and Extendable Data Pipeline for Call of Duty Games: Lessons Learned

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Data lake size

(AWS S3)
Number of topics in the biggest cluster
(Apache Kafka)

500+
10k - 100k+

Messages per second
(Apache Kafka)
Scaling the data pipeline even further

Volume
- Industry best practices

Games
- Using previous experience

Use-cases
- Completely unpredictable
Kafka topics are partitioned and replicated
Scaling the pipeline in terms of Volume
Scaling producers

- Asynchronous / non-blocking writes (default)
- Compression and batching
- Sampling
- Throttling
- Acks? 0, 1, -1
- Standard Kafka producer tuning: batch.size, linger.ms, buffer.memory, etc.
Each approach has pros and cons

- Simple
- Low-latency connection
- Number of TCP connections per broker starts to look scary
- Really hard to do maintenance on Kafka clusters

- Flexible
- Possible to do basic enrichment
- Easier to manage Kafka clusters
Simple rule for high-performant producers? Just write to Kafka, nothing else\(^1\).

1. Not even auth?
Scaling Kafka clusters

• Just add more nodes!
• Disk IO is extremely important
• Tuning `io.threads` and `network.threads`
• Retention
• For more: “Optimizing Your Apache Kafka Deployment” whitepaper from Confluent
It’s not always about tuning. Sometimes we need more than one cluster.

Different workloads require different topologies.
- Ingestion (HTTP Proxy)
- Long retention
- High SLA

- Stream processing
- Short retention
- More partitions

- Lots of consumers
- Medium retention
- ACL
Scaling consumers is usually pretty trivial - just increase the number of partitions.

Unless... you can’t. What then?
Even if you can add more partitions

- Still can have bottlenecks within a partition (large messages)
- In case of reprocessing, it’s really hard to quickly add A LOT of new partitions AND remove them after
- Also, number of partitions is not infinite
You can’t be sure about any improvements without load testing.

Not only for a cluster, but producers and consumers too.
Scaling and extending the pipeline in terms of Games and Use-cases
We need to keep the number of topics and partitions low

- More topics means more operational burden
- Number of partitions in a fixed cluster is not infinite
- Autoscaling Kafka is impossible, scaling is hard
Topic naming convention

$env.$source.$title.$category-$version

prod.glutton.1234.telemetry_match_event-v1

Producer

Unique game id “CoD WW2 on PSN”
A proper solution has been invented decades ago.

Think about databases.
Messaging system IS a form of a database

Data topic = Database + Table.

= Namespace + Data type.
Compare this

prod.glutton.1234.telemetry_match_event-v1
dev.user_login_records.4321.all-v1
prod.marketplace.5678.purchase_event-v1

telemetry.matches
user.logins
marketplace.purchases
Each approach has pros and cons

- Topics that use metadata for their names are obviously easier to track and monitor (and even consume).
- As a consumer, I can consume exactly what I want, instead of consuming a single large topic and extracting required values.
- These dynamic fields can and will change. Producers (sources) and consumers will change.
- Very efficient utilization of topics and partitions.
- Finally, it’s impossible to enforce any constraints with a topic name. And you can always end up with dev data in prod topic and vice versa.
After removing necessary metadata from the topic names, stream processing becomes mandatory.
Stream processing becomes mandatory

Measuring → Validating → Enriching → Filtering & routing
Having a single message schema for a topic is more than just a nice-to-have.
Number of supported message formats

8
Stream processor

- JSON
- Custom
- Avro
- Protobuf
Custom deserialization

// Application.java
props.put("value.deserializer", "com.example.CustomDeserializer");

// CustomDeserializer.java
public class CustomDeserializer implements Deserializer<???> {
    @Override
    public ??? deserialize(String topic, byte[] data) {
        ???
    }
}
Message envelope anatomy

Header / Metadata
ID, env, timestamp, source, game, ...

Body / Payload
Event

Message
Unified message envelope

```protobuf
syntax = "proto2";

message MessageEnvelope {
  optional bytes message_id = 1;
  optional uint64 created_at = 2;
  optional uint64 ingested_at = 3;
  optional string source = 4;
  optional uint64 title_id = 5;
  optional string env = 6;
  optional UserInfo resource_owner = 7;
  optional SchemaInfo schema_info = 8;
  optional string message_name = 9;
  optional bytes message = 100;
}
```
Schema Registry

- API to manage message schemas
- **Single** source of truth for all producers and consumers
- It should be **impossible** to send a message to the pipeline without registering its schema in the Schema Registry!
- Good Schema Registry supports **immutability**, **versioning** and basic **validation**
- Activision uses custom Schema Registry implemented with Python and Cassandra
Summary

• Kafka tuning and best practices matter
• Invest in good SDKs for producing and consuming data
• Unified message envelope and topic names make adding a new game almost effortless
• “Operational” stream processing makes it possible. Make sure you can support adhoc filtering and routing of data
• Topic names should express data types, not producer or consumer metadata
• Schema Registry is a must-have
Thanks!

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