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CRATE: Writing Stories Together with our Browsers

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ABSTRACT

Real-time collaborative editors are common tools for distributing work across space, time, and organizations. Unfortunately, mainstream editors such as Google Docs rely on central servers and raise privacy and scalability issues. CRATE is a real-time decentralized collaborative editor that runs directly in web browsers thanks to WebRTC. Compared to state-of-the-art, CRATE is the first real-time editor that only requires browsers in order to support collaborative editing and to transparently handle from small to large groups of users. Consequently, CRATE can also be used in massive online lectures, TV shows or large conferences to allow users to share their notes. CRATE’s properties rely on two scientific results: (i) a replicated sequence structure with sub-linear upper bound on space complexity; this prevents the editor from running costly distributed garbage collectors, (ii) an adaptive peer sampling protocol; this prevents the editor from oversizing routing tables, hence from letting small networks pay the price of large networks. This paper describes CRATE, its properties and its usage.

Keywords

Collaborative editor; decentralized; real-time

1. INTRODUCTION

Real-time collaborative editors allow authors to simultaneously write shared documents. Trending editors such as Google Docs rely on central servers. They raise privacy issues since service providers take advantage of their mediating position to observe all users and documents. They also raise scalability issues, for they require a server to support an editing session, so handling many editing sessions requires many resources. Managing large editing sessions puts a lot of pressure on the server which may become overloaded.

CRATE is a distributed and decentralized collaborative editor providing scalable real-time editing capabilities directly within web browsers. Compared to state-of-the-art,
writes the readme file of the Github repository about Crate. The green earth indicates that the editing session is live. The blue (spinning) circle indicates that she opens the access to her document. Therefore, anyone can join it with the proper URL. The rightmost editor renders the document written in markdown language. It has a green earth indicating a connected state but contrarily to the leftmost editor, it is not sharing the access to the document.

URLs are the means for accessing to editing sessions, hence, to documents. Internally, when a browser opens the link it retrieves the web application. The latter queries a mediator server with the parameters contained within the link (see Figure 3). The mediator server tries to establish the very first contact between the joining browser and an editing session sharer. The mediator ensures solely a minimal service consisting in the editing session accessibility.

Yet, an URL does not always grant the access to the live editing session, for there must be at least one sharer among the editors. Also, there may exist multiple URLs leading to a same editing session using different joining parameters. As we observe in Figure 1, Crate enables hyperlinks. By the same, it allows surfing between editing sessions like any user would do on Wikipedia, enhanced with real-time capabilities.

3. ARCHITECTURE

To provide availability and responsiveness of documents, Crate follows the optimistic replication scheme. Each editor replicates the document locally and directly performs operations on it. Next, the editor spreads its changes to all other participants. The system is correct iff editors integrating a same set of changes have replicas converging to an equivalent state, i.e., users read the same document. This property is called strong eventual consistency [4].

Crate uses a Conflict-free Replicated Data Type (CRDT) for sequences to ensure such property [4]. CRDTs ensure consistency at the price of a unique identifier attached to each element of the sequence. Recently, LSeq [2] proposed a strategy to bound the space complexity of these identifiers to $O(\log(d)^2)$ where $d$ is the document size. As such, Crate does not require costly distributed garbage-collection-like mechanisms to maintain its efficiency.

Strong eventual consistency requires the eventual delivery of all operations to all editing session members. Crate builds an editing session using Spray [3], a random peer sampling protocol (RPS) built on top of WebRTC. A peer sampling protocol provides each network member with a partial view of the network significantly smaller compared to this latter. Maintaining randomness among partial views ensures the connectivity of the network. Unlike prior RPS, Spray allows adapting the partial view sizes to the editing session size without measuring its number of participants. Since the propagation protocol of messages extensively uses these tables, the network traffic inherits this scalability. Crate adapts its operation to the needs of the editing session.

The decentralized collaborative editor Crate is developed in web languages only: HTML, CSS, and mostly JavaScript. As shown by Figure 2, Crate comprises four layers:

The graphical user interface that renders the document to the users (cf. Figure 1). Each local update is immediately applied to the document view for real-time sake. Then, the update is applied to the replicated data type;
that may rise from the joining part of the protocol. It is worth noting that the number of connection remains constant. In addition, the references in neighborhood tables are randomly distributed. The network converges in exponential time toward a topology exposing properties similar to those of random graphs (cf. Figure 3).

The leaving: the editor can leave the network without giving notice, i.e., equivalent to a crash. Nevertheless, its removal from the system must lead to a decrease of \( \log(N) + 1 \) connections while currently it represents \( \log(N) \) connections from its neighborhood tables, and \( \log(N) \) connections from other editors’ neighborhood tables pointing to it. The adjusting falls under the responsibility of these other editors. For this purpose, they detect the departure of a neighbor when they try to initiate a shuffle with it. Since such detections presumably happen \( \log(N) \) times, they all duplicate one of their neighbors except for one; the probability being processed using their own neighborhood table size.

Random peer sampling protocol constitutes the ground of various protocols such as topology managements. \textsc{crate} uses it to disseminate all operations of the replicated sequence to all collaborators in a scalable manner. Referred as epidemic dissemination, rumor mongering, or gossiping, the protocol is a two-step operation: (i) Each operation performed on the local document replica leads to the creation of a message. The latter is sent to all the neighborhood provided by \textsc{spray}. (ii) Each editor receiving such broadcast message transmits it again to its neighborhood. Thus, messages transitively reach all collaborators very efficiently. This dissemination protocol inherits from \textsc{spray}’s adaptiveness. Hence, traffic follows the editing session size.

Prior approaches generally oversize the partial views to handle largest groups of users. Unfortunately, smaller groups suffer from such a priori dimensioning. Since \textsc{spray} automatically adjusts neighborhood table sizes, it equally and transparently handles from smallest to largest groups.

4. NETWORK OF BROWSERS

\textsc{crate} uses \textsc{spray} [3] to build a network of browsers thanks to WebRTC. The latter is a recent technology that allows establishing browser-to-browser channels of communication. Its connection establishment protocol imposes a round-trip of messages. Thus, if an editor \( e_1 \) wants to connect to another editor \( e_2 \), it needs to send a message to \( e_2 \) and to acknowledge its response. While the first of such connection must use a mediator (e.g., mail, or dedicated server), once established, the network can assume the position of mediator and start working autonomously.

Random peer sampling protocols provide each editor with a local neighborhood table. These tables allow communicating to a subset of editors. Messages travel from neighbor to neighbor to reach any editor in a scalable manner.

\textsc{spray}’s lifecycle at each editor comprises three steps that aim to provide and maintain logarithmically scaling neighborhood tables compared to the editing session size:

The joining: the editor wants to join the editing session. It contacts an editor inside the network and waits for its answer to establish the very first WebRTC connection between them. Using this connection, the joining editor asks to its contact editor to operate as mediator to advertise its presence to the contact’s neighbors. Each of these neighbors connects to the joining peer. Since the number of neighbors is supposed logarithmic, the number of connections in the network grows by \( \log(N) + 1 \) where \( \log(N) \) is the natural logarithm of the network size \( N \). Following such growth, the global number of connections is \( N \log(N) \).

The shuffling: each editor regularly initiates a table shuffling with the oldest of its neighbors. The initiator serves as mediator between half of its neighborhood chosen at random and the oldest neighbor. In response, the oldest neighbor does the same. As a result, they roughly have an identical neighborhood size which tackles the load-balancing problem.
Figure 4: Average traffic per second.

(3) \( i_1 < i_j \iff \exists (m > 0)(\forall n < m), (\ell_n^{i_1} = \ell_n^{i_j}) \land (\ell_m^{i_1} < \ell_m^{i_j}) \)

(4) \( i_1 = i_j \iff \forall m, \ell_m^{i_1} = \ell_m^{i_j} \)

The first two equivalences define an ordering between elements of the list composing the identifiers. The last two equivalences use them to define a global total order amongst identifiers, hence, ordering characters of the document. While the third equivalence is mostly used to locate the proper position of insertion, the fourth equivalence is necessary for removals. Paths of identifiers constitute the most discriminant part of identifiers, hence the most important part.

CRATE uses LSeq to generate the paths of identifiers. The paths are series of integers \( [p_1.p_2 \ldots p_k] \) where each path is chosen among a set twice as large as its preceding path. For instance, if \( p_1 \) is chosen among \( \{0,2^k\} \) then \( p_2 \) is chosen among \( \{0.2^{k+1}\} \) etc. When the document grows, the depth of identifiers is expected to grow. Therefore, increasing the size of sets over depths decreases the growth in depth. LSeq allocates identifiers polylogarithmically upper-bounded compared to the number of insertions, without a priori knowledge of the series of updates.

Keeping the size under such a sub-linear bound avoids the need of an unaffordable distributed garbage-collecting-like mechanism.

6. EXPERIMENT AND DEMONSTRATION

In laboratory, we tested CRATE on the Grid’5000 testbed with configurations involving up till 600 browsers. Figure 4 shows the traffic generated at each member by intensive editing sessions. Overall, the artificial authors insert 100 characters per second during 7 hours. The documents reach millions of characters. Figure 4 shows the combined effects of Spray and LSeq. Indeed, we observe that the traffic logarithmically scales to the editing session size thanks to SPRAY. The members of the smallest editing session (101 browsers) are less traffic intensive than ones of the largest group (601 browsers). But the messages transiting the network are important too. The growth of each plot corresponds to the identifiers size generated by LSeq. Since the document size grows, the identifiers grow, but their growth slows over insertions.

We would like to confirm the results of the experimentation by performing a live demonstration of CRATE that any WWW2016 participant can join. We will start an 

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper we described CRATE, a distributed and decentralized real-time collaborative editor running in web browsers. Compared to state-of-the-art, CRATE allows real-time editing anytime, anywhere, whatever the number of participants. It can be seen as an alternative way to provide a collaborative editing service without Cloud support. Using a scalable replicated data structure for sequences, and an adaptive peer sampling protocol, CRATE is able to alleviate scalability issues and privacy issues without compromising ease-of-access. CRATE’s video, source code and online demo are available at https://github.com/Chat-Wane/CRATE

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9. REFERENCES


