

Evaluating Kubernetes as an orchestrator of the Event Filter computing farm of the Trigger and Data Acquisition system of the ATLAS experiment at the Large Hadron Collider

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Abstract. The ATLAS experiment at the LHC relies on a complex and distributed Trigger and Data Acquisition (TDAQ) system to gather and select particle collision data. The Event Filter (EF) component of the TDAQ system is responsible for executing advanced selection algorithms, reducing the data rate to a level suitable for recording to permanent storage. The EF functionality is provided by a computing farm made up of thousands of commodity servers, each executing one or more processes. Moving the EF farm management towards a solution based on software containers is one of the main themes of the ATLAS TDAQ Phase-II upgrades in the area of the online software; it would make it possible to open new possibilities for fault tolerance, reliability and scalability. This paper presents the results of an evaluation of Kubernetes as a possible orchestrator of the ATLAS TDAQ EF computing farm. Kubernetes is a system for advanced management of containerized applications in large clusters. This paper will first highlight some of the technical solutions adopted to run the offline version of today's EF software in a Docker container. Then it will focus on some scaling performance measurements executed with a cluster of 1000 CPU cores. In particular, this paper will report about the way Kubernetes scales in deploying containers as a function of the cluster size and show how a proper tuning of the Query per Second (QPS) Kubernetes parameter set can improve the scaling of applications in terms of running replicas. Finally, an assessment will be given about the possibility to use Kubernetes as an orchestrator of the EF computing farm in LHC's Run 4.

1 Introduction

During Run 2, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) [1] operated at a centre-of-mass energy of 13 TeV, with a peak luminosity of about $2.0 \times 10^{34} \text{ cm}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$ and more than 60 interactions per

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bunch crossing. The High Luminosity LHC project (HL-LHC) [2], planned to start in 2026, will target a peak luminosity of $7.5 \times 10^{34} \text{ cm}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$ with more than 200 interactions per bunch crossing. The HL-LHC upgrades will occur during the so-called Long Shutdown 3 (LS3, from 2024 to 2026). Therefore, the ATLAS [3] Trigger and Data Acquisition (TDAQ) system will undergo a substantial upgrade [4] in order to cope with the higher luminosity provided by the accelerator and exploit the HL-LHC physics potential.

The upgraded TDAQ system will sustain an input rate of 1 MHz (10 times more than in Run 2) with an average event size of about 5 MB (4 times more than in Run 2). It will include a large IT infrastructure, with thousands of computing nodes and applications to supervise. The Event Filter (EF) component of the TDAQ system is responsible for the reduction of the data rate to a level suitable for recording to permanent storage. The EF functionality will be provided by a large computing farm, made up of about 3000 hosts.

The Storage Handler component will stand between the detector read-out and the EF. The Storage Handler will buffer data received from the read-out (up to one hour of event buffering), actually decoupling the read-out and the EF operations. Therefore, the presence of the Storage Handler will allow to operate the EF in several different manners:

- decoupled or not from the LHC cycles;
- executing prompt or delayed processing;
- hosting mixed workloads (e.g., Monte Carlo production).

A robust and reliable mechanism for the management of all processes running in the EF farm is a requirement to guarantee a stable and efficient execution of the EF service. The following chapters will focus on the evaluation of a possible candidate to orchestrate the EF computing farm operations.

2 Event Filter farm orchestration

The EF computing farm hosts both the processing units (PUs) and all the supporting services needed to implement the last step of the event selection of the TDAQ system. In modern software architectures, the management of large clusters of computing nodes is delegated to so-called “Cluster Orchestrator” services. In a system like the TDAQ system, a Cluster Orchestrator will fulfil a series of well-defined basic requirements:

- it will support different types of application lifecycles (i.e., always-running, run-to-completion and cron-like services);
- it will allow both dynamic and static allocation of processes to computing nodes;
- it will be able to dynamically handle cluster resources (i.e., enabling/disabling computation units at runtime, efficient exploitation of the available CPU power and memory);
- it will scale to thousands of hosts;
- it will control (i.e., starting, stopping) and monitor the status of all active processes;
- it will allow to completely describe the requirements for all processes that need to be started, including the definition of command-line parameters and environment variables to be passed to the executable.

A survey of the offers currently available on the open-source market (based on the requirements above) highlighted Kubernetes [5] to be an excellent candidate as an orchestrator for the EF computing farm. Kubernetes was announced by Google to the open-source community in 2014 [6] and is based on 15 years of experience at Google in managing

and orchestrating large clusters. Since its first release, the Kubernetes open-source community has experienced steady-growth, reaching more than 1500 commits per month and more than 150 contributors per month in February 2017 [7]. Today, Kubernetes is a mature product contributed to by several technology partners like RedHat, CoreOS and Intel.

Kubernetes can be described as “a system for automating deployment, scaling and management of containerised applications”. Among several supported features, Kubernetes provides a set of services facilitating easy and effective management of applications in a cluster:

- scheduling of applications based on required resources and other constraints;
- automatic re-scheduling of applications when the application itself fails or the node where the application is running dies;
- built-in support for service discovery and load-balancing;
- management of several storage back-ends, allowing transparent mounting of both local and network storage volumes;
- easy (via command line tools or GUIs) and automated (based on CPU usage) scaling of the number of application instances.

Kubernetes requires applications to be packed into software containers. Containers exploit virtualisation at the level of the operating system and are lightweight and simpler to build than Virtual Machines, which instead exploit hardware virtualisation. Packing an application into a container makes it possible to create immutable images disentangling the application itself from the host operating system. In such a way, containers do not only provide strong resource isolation but also make the development, integration and deployment cycle easier, thus simplifying software portability and distribution. Kubernetes supports Docker [8] containers. Docker is currently the market-leading container platform.

3 EF processing units in software containers

As a proof of concept, a small Kubernetes cluster (4 nodes) was set up using the CERN IT Virtual Infrastructure [9], with the goal of running EF PU instances in software containers. The PUs themselves were emulated with the offline version of today's EF software (i.e., AthenaHLT) using a realistic trigger menu. A Docker container image was created starting from a base SLC6 [10] image and adding a few additional packages. The EF software was retrieved directly from the CVMFS [11] installation repository. Kubernetes was able to mount the CVMFS volume (via a dedicated Flexvolume [12] driver) and transparently make it available to the containers, allowing to keep the size of the Docker image to a few hundred megabytes. In order to better simulate data processing activity and mimic the future interaction between the EF and the Storage Handler, two additional mount points were added to the container: an input directory with data files containing real events, and an output directory receiving the results of event selection algorithms. The AthenaHLT image was distributed to and executed by the Kubernetes cluster. Events were correctly retrieved from the input data files and processed by the PUs, with selection results stored in the output directory.

4 Performance and scaling

In the most recent release available at the time of writing, Kubernetes is able to handle computing clusters with up to 5000 nodes populated with up to 150,000 containers [13]. To

satisfy this requirement Kubernetes fulfils two performance goals for the reported cluster size:

- 99% of the calls to its backend (e.g., the calls to inspect the state of a container) return in less than 1 s;
- containers (with pre-pulled images) are able to start within 5 s with a probability of 99%[†].

It is worth noting that the performance goals were achieved with the cluster being fully populated; giving also an estimation of the time needed to restart a container in case of failures. Larger clusters are also supported, but with degraded performance.

The time needed to completely fill the cluster represents another crucial performance and scaling figure, particularly important for system operations. Since Kubernetes does not provide any official result in that respect, some specific and dedicated experiments were performed on a cluster made up of about 1000 virtual cores. The cluster was organised in the following way: one Kubernetes master node (32 CPU cores and 60 GB of RAM) and 240 slave nodes (4 CPU cores and 8 GB of RAM each). All the nodes were equipped with CPUs of the Intel Broadwell family clocked at 2.2 GHz. The latest Kubernetes version (1.5) available on the CERN virtual infrastructure was used.



Fig. 1. Number of started *pause* containers as a function of time for a cluster of 240 hosts and five replicas per host. Time is counted from the moment the command to deploy the containers is sent to Kubernetes. Measured times are reported for four different values of the QPS parameter set.

The tests aimed at measuring the time needed to scale an application to a certain number of replicas (from one to five instances per host). In order to minimise the impact of the started

[†] Performance of a big cluster is sensitive to the size of the Kubernetes “master” node (i.e., the cluster control plane). The Kubernetes documentation indicates that the reported performance figures were achieved running tests on the Google Compute Engine using a *n1-standard-32* [14] virtual machine for the master node.

applications on the measurement (i.e., they may consume CPU cycles competing with the Kubernetes system), a pause container was used and its image was pre-pulled into the cluster. Such a container sleeps for an undefined period of time after being started with very minimal resource usage.

Figure 1 shows the time needed to scale the pause container up to five replicas per node as a function of the cluster size, for a total of 1200 started containers in a 240 host cluster. The number of replicas was chosen to match the number of applications executed on each EF

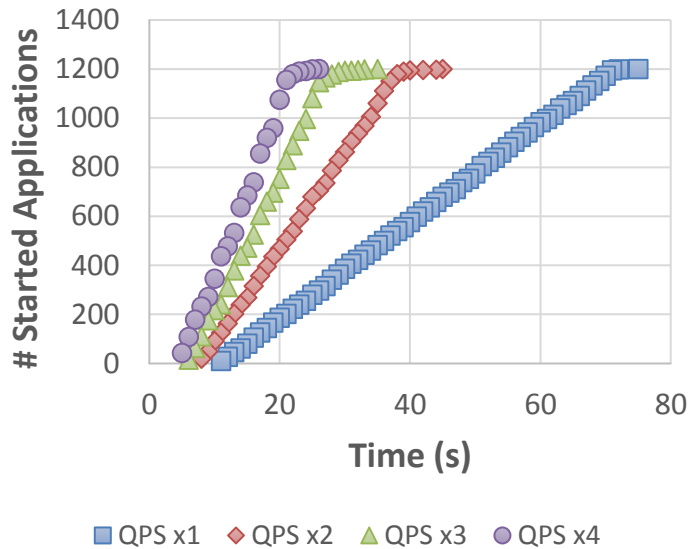


Fig. 2. Number of started pause containers as a function of time for a cluster of 240 hosts and five replicas per host. Time is counted from the moment the command to deploy the containers is sent to Kubernetes. Measured times are reported for four different values of the QPS parameter set.

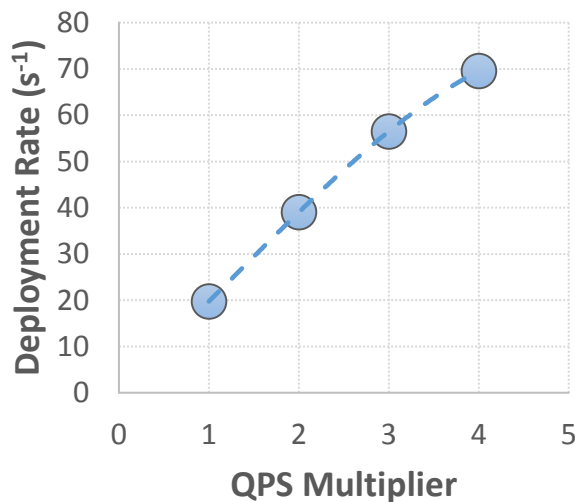


Fig. 3. Sustained rate of the pause container deployment for different values of the QPS parameter set. With QPS values four times higher than the Kubernetes default configuration, a sustained rate of 70 containers per second is reached.

host during LHC's Run 2 (as a reference, in Run 2 fully populating the EF cluster - 2000 hosts - took about 30 seconds). The size of the cluster could be easily changed by enabling or disabling the corresponding hosts in the Kubernetes scheduler. The measurements are reported for different values of the Kubernetes Query per Second (QPS) configuration parameter. The QPS set is used to set a limit on the maximum number of requests the different Kubernetes components can handle. In such a way it is possible to avoid overloading the system, resulting in a possible denial of service. The default QPS values are quite conservative and defined to safely allow Kubernetes to run on a wide range of hardware platforms. Tests were executed increasing QPS values to up to four times their defaults.

Kubernetes performance proved to be strongly dependent on the QPS configuration. As an example, the time to fully scale the pause container to 1200 replicas in a 240 hosts cluster decreased from about 74 seconds down to 27 seconds with the most aggressive QPS configuration. The impact of QPS settings can also be seen in Figures 2 and 3. The QPS value does not only strongly impact the rate at which Kubernetes manages to deploy applications, but it also has an impact on the time needed to start the first container (from 11 seconds down to 5 seconds for QPS values four times higher than the default configuration). At the same time it is evident how the time needed to have all the containers up and running is impacted by a few outlier instances beyond the 95th percentile. That behaviour could not be traced back to any slow node in the cluster and needs further investigation in order to be properly understood. At the same time, it impacts performance figures only marginally.

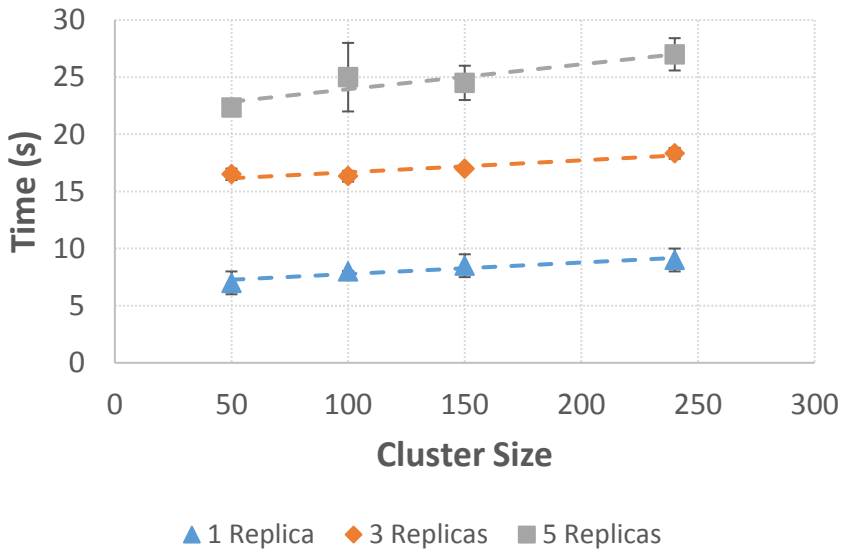


Fig. 4. Time to fully populate the cluster with pause containers as a function of the cluster size and for different number of replicas on each host. QPS values are set to four times the default Kubernetes configuration. Extrapolating the results for one replica to a cluster of 3000 nodes, the cluster itself would be fully populated in about 35 seconds.

5 Conclusions

In general, the executed tests demonstrated that:

- the capability of Kubernetes to deploy containers in a cluster scales linearly with the size of the cluster itself. Assuming no higher order effects with larger clusters (Kubernetes officially supports 5000 hosts clusters), an EF PU service instance can be fully deployed on each node of a 3000 host cluster in about 35 seconds (Figure 4), matching the corresponding performance figures in Run 2 after a proper choice of the QPS values;
- Kubernetes performance is highly dominated by its QPS configuration. QPS values four times higher than their defaults make it possible to reach a sustained deployment rate of almost 70 containers per second (to be compared to about 20 containers per second with the out-of-the-box configuration). The Kubernetes development road map aims to reach a rate of 100 containers per second on a 5000 host cluster in upcoming releases.

Overall Kubernetes performance has proven to be sufficient for its usage as an orchestrator of the EF computing farm. Even so, it will be worthwhile to keep monitoring upcoming Kubernetes releases in order to track and verify evolving performance figures.

Appendix

Several Kubernetes modules expose some QPS parameters, mainly to configure the interaction with the API server. As reported in the previous paragraphs, the out-of-the-box configuration resulted in poor performance in terms of container deployment rate. The QPS values can be modified applying changes to the command line parameters of the concerned modules. Table 1A reports all the parameters that have been modified for this study: the first column contains the concerned Kubernetes components, while the second column contains the corresponding command line option(s). Default values are reported in brackets and they were coherently scaled by a constant factor ranging from one to four.

Table 1A. QPS-related command line parameters that have been modified for each Kubernetes component. Default values are reported in brackets.

Component	Parameters (def. values)
kubelet	event-qps (5) kube-api-qps (5) event-burst (10) kube-api-burst (10)
kube-controller-manager	kube-api-qps (20) kube-api-burst (30)
kube-proxy	kube-api-qps (5)
kube-scheduler	kube-api-qps (50) kube-api-burst (100)

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