Software as a Service Engineering

Richard Sharp
What is SaaS?
SaaS (Software as a Service) refers to software that is hosted centrally and licensed to customers on a subscription basis.

Users access SaaS software via thin clients, (often web browsers).
Traditional software distribution (pre SaaS)

Software company

- Build software
- Release versioned binaries

Software, and updates. (versioned binaries)

Customer_1

PoC → Purchasing Decision → Deploy → Support/ manage

... upgrade

Customer_n

PoC → Purchasing Decision → Deploy → Support/ manage

upgrade
Traditional software distribution (pre SaaS)

Build software → Release versioned binaries

Software company

PoC → Purchasing Decision → Deploy → Support/ manage

Customer_1

Software, and updates. (versioned binaries)

High Total Cost of Ownership (TCO)
Expensive duplication
Lack of specialization
SaaS

Lower TCO

Much less duplication of operating activities

Much better specialisation in this division of labour
Impact of SaaS on the Software Engineering Process
Impact on the ‘software company’

Binary distribution

Build software

Release versioned binaries

Software company

SaaS

Build software

Deploy

Support/manage

Software company

upgrade
Impact on the ‘software company’

● Now have to worry about building software and running it
● Have to continue evolving/upgrading the software with zero downtime

But the good news:

● ‘Software release’ no longer an all-or-nothing discrete event
  ○ Provides new ways to manage quality and reduce risk
● Continuous visibility into user behavior
  ○ Provides user/commercial insights back into iterative software development process
Managing Continuous Deployment Without Downtime
Continuous Integration (CI): short integration cycles lead to greater throughput

Developers commit to shared dev ‘mainline’ branch frequently (e.g. at least once a day)
Continuous Deployment (CD): bring ‘deploy’ into the ‘short cycle’

- Continuous Integration
  - Built artifacts
  - Immediate alerting/feedback on fail condition

- Automated deploy to ‘test server’ environment
  - Run automated acceptance tests
  - Production monitoring / alerting provides immediate feedback, but now failures are visible to customers...

- Automated deploy to production (‘live servers’)
Continuous Deployment (CD): bring ‘deploy’ into the ‘short cycle’

How to do this while reducing risk?
How to do this while ‘always on’?

Production monitoring / alerting provides immediate feedback, but now failures are visible to customers...

Continuous Integration

Built artifacts

Automated deploy to ‘test server’ environment

Run automated acceptance tests

Automated deploy to production (‘live servers’)

Immediate alerting/feedback on fail condition
Rolling deploy

25% of traffic each

Load Balancer

x.y  x.y  x.y  x.y

Note: these resources are usually running in a cloud platform. So virtual machines, load balancers, storage, network etc. can all be provisioned and configured through the cloud platform’s APIs.
Rolling deploy: 1) Deploy ‘canary’ (limit exposure/risk)

24.75% of traffic each to x.y instances

Load Balancer

1% of traffic to x.(y+1)
Rolling deploy: 2) Automated monitoring of error rates - OK?

- Automated monitoring of error rates - OK?
- Load Balancer
- 24.75% of traffic each to x.y instances
- 1% of traffic to x.(y+1)
- Centralised logging
- Automated alerts
Rolling deploy: 3) Move traffic from old instance to new
Rolling deploy: 4) Upgrade 0% instance

Load Balancer

x.y  x.y  x.y  x.(y+1)  x.(y+1)

25%  25%  25%  0%  25%

Automated alerts

Centralised logging
Rolling deploy: 5) Move traffic from old instance to new etc.
Rolling deploy: Repeat \{move traffic old->new; upgrade old\}
Rolling deploy: ...

Load Balancer

25% 25% 25% 25%

x.(y+1) x.(y+1) x.(y+1) x.(y+1)

Destroy last x.y instance

Automated alerts

Centralised logging

(If anything unexpected happens then can **pause** at any point; aim to ‘roll forward’ rather than ‘rolling back’...)

x.(y+1)
Rolling deploy with service dependencies

Challenge:
How do we upgrade the dependent service while keeping everything running?

And how do we handle this if we need to make a ‘breaking change’ to the dependent service’s API?
Rolling deploy with service dependencies

Challenge:

How do we upgrade the dependent service while keeping everything running?

And how do we handle this if we need to make a ‘breaking change’ to the dependent service’s API?
Rolling deploy with service dependencies

Challenge:

How do we upgrade the dependent service while keeping everything running?

And how do we handle this if we need to make a ‘breaking change’ to the dependent service’s API?
Rolling deploy with service dependencies

Challenge:
How do we upgrade the dependent service while keeping everything running?

And how do we handle this if we need to make a ‘breaking change’ to the dependent service’s API?
Review

- Rolling deploy is a technique for upgrading and developing SaaS software with zero downtime
- Enables better ways of managing quality/risk
  - Releasing at low % mitigates effect of production bug that escapes QA
  - Fixes can be distributed to all customers easily and quickly
Behavioural analytics and experiments
A simple behavioural analytics pipeline

Users; often each identified by unique ID

Behavioural ‘events’ (e.g. At time t, user u, clicked button b)

Analytics collectors

Big time sequence of events for all users

SaaS company’s infrastructure

Processing/Enrichment

Reporting

Queries run by analysts
What can we learn from the event logs?

- **User/growth metrics:**
  - Monthly Active Unique Users (MAU); Daily Active Unique Users (DAU)

- **Engagement:**
  - Time spent using the service

- **Feature usage/growth/engagement metrics:**
  - X% of users tried feature F at least once in the last month
  - Y% of users used feature F2 for at least 5 minutes last week
  - Feature F3 usage growing at Z% year-on-year

- **Insights based on user segmentation:**
  - Users who signed up in January 2018 exhibit an average 2% monthly churn
  - Female users aged between 20-25 are X% more likely to use feature F at least once
What else can we learn from the event logs?

- **Correlations**
  - Usage of feature F2 is correlated with usage of feature F1
  - Daily time spent on the platform is correlated with the number of days since sign-up

- **But NOT cause and effect... At least not without an experiment framework.**
How can we move from correlations to cause/effect?

- Run controlled experiments:
  - Determine hypothesis to test
  - Determine level of exposure, E, (% of users that will go into experiment group)
  - Bucket users into either experiment group (E%) or control group (100-E)%
  - Release a change to the experiment group only
  - Measure relevant metric(s) in both control group and experiment group and determine whether the observed difference is statistically significant

- By measuring difference between control and experiment groups we can have some confidence that the difference is due to our ‘change under test’

- Often pick low E and ramp up (e.g. 1%, 10%, 25%, 50%)
  - Similar to phased deploy alerting, but measures ‘do users like it’ rather than ‘are there errors’

- Experiment throughput can quickly become limited by traffic volume
A/B test architecture

IF (hash(UID.EID) mod 100) < E THEN serve experiment variant
ELSE serve control variant

Where:
UID = User ID
EID = Experiment ID (one per experiment)
E = size of experiment group for experiment EID
A/B test architecture

IF (hash(UID.EID) mod 100) < E THEN serve experiment variant
ELSE serve control variant

Where:
UID = User ID
EID = Experiment ID (one per experiment)
E = size of experiment group for experiment EID

- Users persistently in a control or experiment group; don’t ‘flap’
- Users in existing experiment group remain in experiment group as E increased
- Works for multiple concurrent experiments (but be careful of independence assumptions)
A/B test architecture

Users

Behavioural ‘events’: At time $t$, user $u$, in experiment groups for EID1, EID5, clicked button $b$

For each experiment, $e$, generate reports for metrics of interest segmented by (i) ‘in EID$_e$’; and (ii) ‘not in EID$_e$’. Compare these results for each metric and test statistical significance.
Summary
Summary

● Putting the manage/deploy/upgrade cycle into the software company is a profound change with far-reaching consequences:
  ○ Economically:
    ■ Reduces customer TCO and barriers to purchasing
    ■ Leads to better specialisation, and less duplication; creates new business models
  ○ Operationally:
    ■ Enables new ways of doing QA, which changes the economics of testing
    ■ Phased releases (which can take place over days if required, with flexibility to pause and fix at any time); live monitoring/alerting
  ○ Enables building of higher quality software through increased visibility of user behavior. (N.B. with great power comes great responsibility!)
    ■ Behavioural analytics
    ■ Experiments