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Demystifying Distributed Systems in Cloud-Native Environments

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Abstract

This article tackles the complex world of distributed systems and their place in cloud environments. It shows how these architectural approaches underpin today's digital world, letting programs run across many machines while seeming seamless to those who use them. Readers discover critical ideas like consistency frameworks, data mirroring approaches, failure resistance methods, and agreement techniques that shape distributed system behavior. Further article reveals crucial building blocks—traffic spreading tools, message handling frameworks, scattered data stores, service location mechanisms, and unified access points—that together create tough, expandable system designs. Through real-life examples from search tools, online shops, payment networks, content-sharing systems, and ticket sales platforms, the article demonstrates how abstract distributed computing concepts become practical answers for tough business problems. By linking theoretical ideas with hands-on implementation approaches, this article equips tech specialists with essential knowledge for tackling the complexity of distributed computing in our increasingly connected digital world.

Keywords: Cloud-Native Architecture, Consistency Models, Fault Tolerance, Consensus Mechanisms, Distributed Databases

1. Introduction

Digital infrastructures have undergone a paradigm shift, where the use of distributed architectures has been adopted as the backbone of scalable technology infrastructures. Such elaborate structures enable applications to run stably across large numbers of machines, producing fault-tolerant services that deal with a large workload. The move away from single-block structures toward distributed frameworks marks perhaps the most profound change in computing history, fueled by exploding data processing demands and the need to serve users scattered across global markets, as noted in foundational research [1].

Businesses spanning numerous industries have adopted distributed architectures to power digital transformation efforts. Banks process transaction volumes, reaching astronomical figures every second, retail websites absorb holiday traffic spikes without stumbling, and media services deliver content to massive viewer numbers simultaneously. Behind these capabilities lies a tangled web of distributed pieces working together to create smooth user experiences. These distributed architectures are now imperative to organizations from industry analyses [2] in trying to enjoy the benefits of competitive advantage in a market that is increasingly becoming digital.

The anchor of cloud technologies has precipitated a rapid change in the model of distributed computing. The Cloud environments provide the best basis for distributed systems since they allow the required flexibility, durability, and international coverage that modern applications need. As traditional technology boundaries continue melting away, mastery of distributed system principles becomes vital knowledge for technology professionals. Research published by Luiz André Barroso, Urs Hölzle, and Parthasarathy Ranganathan [1] demonstrates that cloud-native platforms have accelerated distributed system adoption by reducing implementation complexity while enhancing capabilities.

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

This exploration delves into fundamental distributed system concepts and their practical applications within cloud settings. Whether it is the consistency models in place to provide the correctness of the information in the system or the resilience methods to ensure the system continues to operate even when certain components have failed, these concepts lend the foundational knowledge to constructing reliable, large-scale systems. By studying theoretical foundations, as well as practical patterns of application, technology experts may acquire critical knowledge that would help them overcome distributed computing challenges in a more interconnected digital world. Useful frameworks have been developed for implementing these concepts effectively, and industry experts have documented such design patterns [2].

The difficulties of distributed systems, such as network partitions, component death, and trade-offs between consistency, are not just technical problems to overcome but incentives to engineer structures more resistant to network disturbances. Organizations are on their cloud journeys, and the idea that makes it an advantage and competition is to master these concepts to create a team of system builders who can create systems that grow dynamically and easily recover from failures with consistent performance on a global deployment. The study of resiliency in distributed systems [1] indicates that such properties have evolved to be a requirement in mission-critical applications within current digital constructs.

2. Understanding Distributed Systems

Distributed systems are assemblages of autonomous computing machines, which appear to the user as one coherent system. Communication and protocols are used to synchronize these independent systems, principally through message passing and shared state management. This coordination allows them to function as cohesive units despite physical separation. The architectural approach has become fundamental to modern computing infrastructure, supporting everything from cloud platforms to global banking networks. Driving the evolution of distributed systems are growing data volumes and rising user expectations for services that remain constantly accessible while scaling dynamically to match demand, as documented in comprehensive analyses [1] of distributed computing trends.

The defining characteristic of distributed systems lies in their ability to deliver seamless experiences while operating across geographically scattered hardware. Users interact with such systems without needing awareness of the complex coordination happening behind visible interfaces. This abstraction layer hides intricate mechanisms, including consensus algorithms, data duplication strategies, and failure detection systems that collectively maintain system coherence. As Ajay D. Kshemkalyani and Mukesh Singhal explain in their influential work on distributed systems [3], the primary goal involves presenting users with unified views despite underlying complexity, making the distributed nature transparent while harnessing the advantages of multiple computing resources.

Modern distributed architectures typically employ layered designs that separate concerns while providing clear interfaces between components. The communication layer handles message exchange between nodes, implementing protocols that accommodate varying network conditions and partial failures. The coordination layer manages the distributed state and ensures appropriate consistency guarantees based on application requirements. The application layer implements business logic while leveraging the underlying distributed infrastructure. Shuo Chen in his study of the evolution of distributed computing [4], indicated that such division of concerns is a crucial architecture pattern, occurring in many fields, both on the web services and in the connected device community, which is not only conceptually clear but also practically advantageous in terms of system development and maintenance.

The environment of deploying a distributed system has evolved drastically in the past few decades with the shift in infrastructure and protocols tailored to a standardized platform, as well as technology. The

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

container orchestration frameworks, such as Kubernetes, have been used to create powerful platforms to distribute and manage applications, and specially designed databases and messaging platforms have been created to provide optimized solutions to particular distributed computing problems. Such an ecosystem approach gives an organization the ability to create a sophisticated distributed system by integrating specialized components rather than creating custom systems de novo. All this notwithstanding, designing a distributed system still requires trade-offs in terms of consistency, availability, performance, and the operational complexity of such a system in terms of being able to select alternatives that are appropriate to the businesses involved and their relative priorities [2].

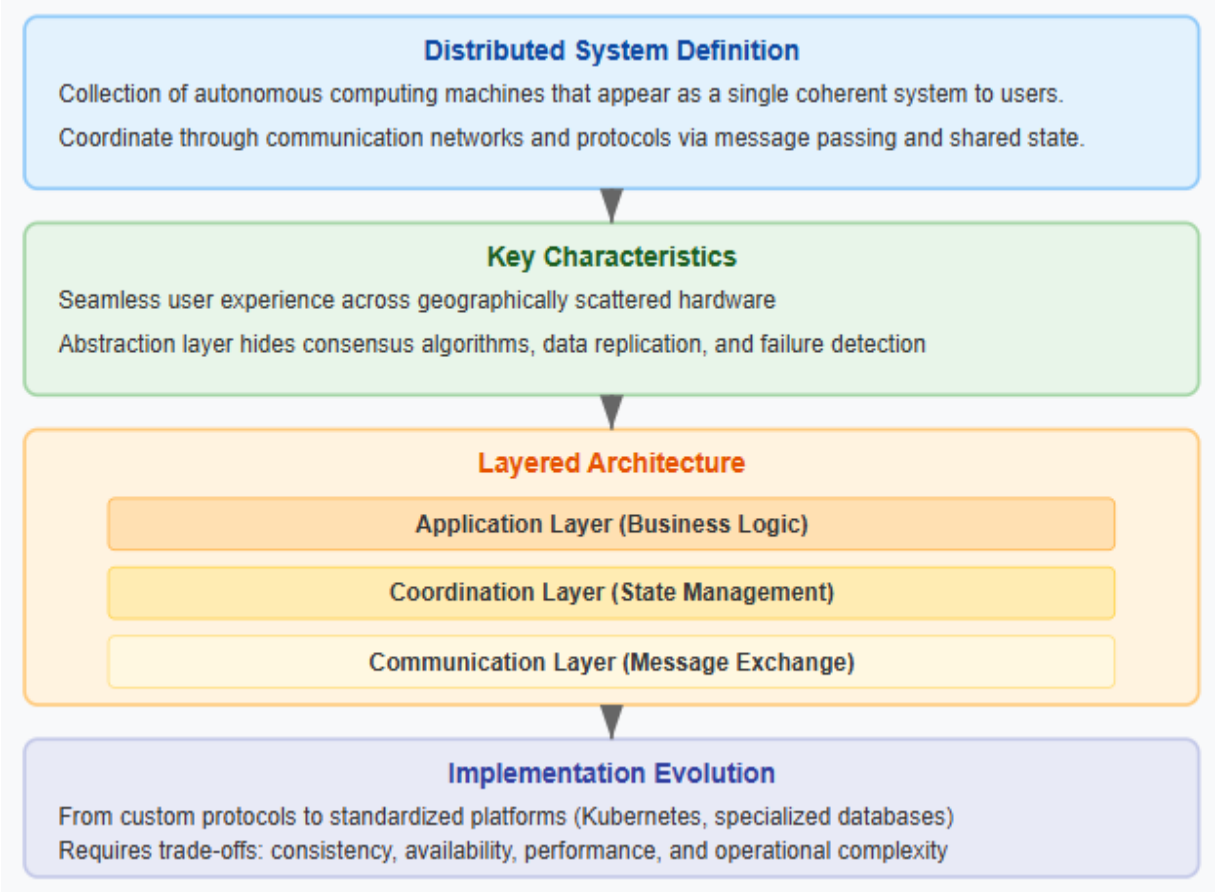

Fig 1: Distributed Systems Architecture [1-4]

3. Core Concepts and Principles

3.1 Consistency Models

Consistency across nodes is one of the main considerations in a distributed system. The CAP theorem characterizes the necessary tradeoff between consistency, availability, and partition tolerance that underlies the design of distributed systems. Real-world implementations require architects to pick consistent approaches that match application needs while recognizing these built-in limitations.

Strong consistency guarantees all nodes view identical data simultaneously, delivering a traditional database experience but frequently sacrificing availability during network splits. This approach creates an illusion of single-copy data despite the system's distributed nature, easing application development but demanding sophisticated coordination methods. Research reveals in their analysis [5] that strong consistency typically depends on distributed locks or consensus mechanisms, adding delays proportional

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

to network communication times, creating performance bottlenecks, and worsening with geographic spread.

Eventual consistency favors availability by permitting temporary inconsistencies that fix themselves over time. This strategy acknowledges perfect synchronization across distributed nodes remains unrealistic in many cases, especially global deployments or mobile networks. Systems using eventual consistency keep running during network problems but need conflict resolution techniques to fix divergent states when connections return. The approach has gained traction in massively distributed databases and content networks where constant availability outweighs immediate consistency [5]. Industry practitioners note eventual consistency offers substantial performance benefits when implemented with appropriate conflict resolution strategies.

Causal consistency preserves consistency for related operations while letting unrelated operations proceed independently. This middle-path approach maintains logical ordering between dependent operations without demanding global synchronization for separate events. Studies show in their CAP theorem analysis [6] that causal consistency offers a practical compromise, delivering stronger guarantees than eventual consistency while sidestepping the heavy coordination overhead demanded by strong consistency models. Field implementations demonstrate that causal consistency works particularly well for collaborative applications where operational relationships matter more than absolute ordering.

3.2 Data Replication

Replication copies the same data from several machines to raise reliability and performance. This underlines that the distributed systems methods also support the requirements of fault tolerance and the scaling requirements of systems, so they can stand system-offered component failures and distribute read workloads amongst nodes. Modern replication schemes strive to achieve a balance between data consistency, application performance, and resource consumption, depending on the requirements of the applications.

Synchronous replication requires the updates to be confirmed by all the replicas before completion. The approach ensures uniformity within multiple replicas, but it creates a delay in the slowest replica. Production systems usually adopt such quorum-based protocols that demand confirmation of only a few replicas (not every replica), weigh the consistency assurances, and perform practical activities. Experts note [5] that synchronous replication provides good write durability guarantees despite slower write response times and is therefore appropriate in the design of a system with higher data integrity requirements as compared to performance. This strategy is common in banking applications, even though it is costly in terms of performance.

With the help of asynchronous replication, the primary node is still able to work even though the changes are replicated to other replicas in the background. Writes are dramatically reduced, and write-offloads are supported by the separation of primary work and replica synchronization, so a high volume of writes is possible. Asynchronous replication systems need frequent containment of replication lag and possible data loss in the event of primary failures. Research indicates [6] that asynchronous replication provides a convenient trade-off between performance and consistency guarantees and becomes especially important in systems that are globally distributed because synchronous replication can lead to intolerable delays. This is a familiar strategy used by e-commerce websites to do product catalog updates.

Multi-region replication enables information to be replicated at geographic locations to support disaster recovery and the enhancement of performance. This strategy safeguards against regional failures and minimizes access latencies for geographically dispersed users. Through multi-region replication, one encounters complex issues of conflict, data sovereignty, and network optimization. Studies point out [5]

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

that multi-region architectures require a delicate balance of how replication strategies compose with consistency models, typically applying region-local optimizations within global correctness guarantees. Advanced implementations, Financial institutions have been on the forefront setting up of advanced implementations that balance the needs of regulatory bodies with the demands of performance.

3.3 Failure Detection and Fault Tolerance

Distributed systems must assume components will fail. Component failure probability rises with system scale, making fault tolerance a core requirement rather than an exception in large distributed environments. Modern architectures implement layered fault tolerance strategies addressing different failure types while maintaining system availability.

Heartbeat protocols establish regular signals between nodes confirming operational status. These lightweight communication patterns provide foundational failure detection without excessive overhead. Heartbeat implementations must balance detection speed against false positive rates, particularly in environments with unstable network conditions. Research describes [5] how effective heartbeat mechanisms adapt to observed network behavior, adjusting timing parameters to minimize false alarms while ensuring timely failure detection. Cloud providers have developed sophisticated adaptive heartbeat mechanisms based on historical network performance data.

Failure detectors implement algorithms identifying unavailable nodes. These components extend basic heartbeat mechanisms with advanced logic distinguishing between node failures and network problems. Modern failure detectors typically use probabilistic approaches, quantifying confidence in failure detection rather than making simple yes/no judgments. Researchers explore [6] the theoretical limits of failure detection in asynchronous networks, proving that perfect detection remains impossible and establishing the foundation for practical approximations used in production systems. Leading database implementations incorporate these probabilistic models to minimize unnecessary failover events.

Redundancy deploys duplicate components, maintaining system functionality when failures occur. This fundamental fault tolerance strategy spans multiple levels of distributed architectures, from redundant network paths to replicated services and data. Effective redundancy requires independence between redundant components to avoid correlated failures, often achieved through diversity in hardware, software, and physical location. Experts stress [5] that redundancy forms the cornerstone of fault-tolerant design, appearing throughout virtually all production distributed systems despite added complexity and resource costs. Content delivery networks maintain redundancy across dozens of geographic regions to ensure content availability despite regional outages.

3.4 Consensus Mechanisms

Distributed systems require nodes to agree on the system state despite asynchronous communication and potential failures. Consensus mechanisms provide the foundation for coordination in distributed environments, enabling consistent decision-making across independent nodes. These protocols represent some of the most theoretically complex yet practically important aspects of distributed system design.

Paxos and Raft's algorithms allow distributed systems to reach consensus despite partial failures. These protocols provide formal guarantees regarding agreement, validity, and termination despite node failures and network partitions. While theoretically sound, implementing these algorithms in production environments demands careful attention to practical considerations, including timeout management, log persistence, and membership changes. Research provides [5] a detailed examination of consensus algorithm implementations, highlighting both theoretical foundations and practical optimization strategies developed through production experience. Technology companies have contributed significant open-source implementations incorporating lessons from large-scale deployments.

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

Leader election establishes the process of selecting a primary node to coordinate operations in distributed systems. This pattern simplifies consensus by centralizing coordination responsibilities while maintaining fault tolerance through election protocols that automatically select new leaders when failures occur. Modern leader election implementations typically use randomized timeouts and incremental term numbers to prevent split-brain scenarios while ensuring eventual leader selection. Studies demonstrate [6] that while leader election simplifies coordination, it introduces potential availability challenges during leader transitions, requiring careful design to minimize disruption. Database clusters commonly implement refined leader election protocols based on extensive production experience.

Distributed transactions ensure operations across multiple nodes complete atomically, providing all-or-nothing semantics that simplify application development. These protocols extend local transaction concepts to distributed environments, maintaining ACID properties despite partial failures and network partitions. Two-phase commit represents the traditional approach to distributed transactions, though it creates availability problems during coordinator failures. As researchers explain in their CAP theorem analysis [6], distributed transaction protocols face fundamental constraints in asynchronous networks with potential partitions, leading to practical implementations that relax theoretical guarantees to achieve acceptable performance and availability characteristics. Financial systems have developed specialized transaction protocols balancing strict consistency requirements with operational resiliency.

Consistency Model	Consistency Level	Availability	Performance	Use Cases
Strong Consistency	High	Low during partitions	Lower (higher latency)	Banking, Financial transactions
Eventual Consistency	Low initially, improves over time	High	Higher	Content delivery, Social media
Causal Consistency	Medium	Medium	Medium	Collaborative applications

Table 1: Consistency-Availability Trade-offs in Distributed Systems [5, 6]

4. Infrastructure Components

The practical implementation of distributed systems depends on several essential technologies forming the cornerstone of modern cloud platforms. These elements collaborate to produce resilient, expandable systems that function despite individual component breakdowns while delivering consistent performance. These building blocks of infrastructure are still important knowledge to those professionals who intend to develop distributed programs.

Load balancers balance the load of the traffic network to several groups of servers and prevent overloading a single machine. As the first line of distributed architectures, the tools divert the client requests to the necessary backend resources and monitor the health and control the failover circumstances. Contemporary load balancers employ sophisticated routing logic accounting for server conditions, current capacity, physical location, and request attributes. Schiper's examination of dynamic group communication [7] reveals that effective load balancing not only spreads workload but also establishes critical fault boundaries by diverting traffic from problematic instances, preventing isolated issues from compromising overall system accessibility. Advanced implementations incorporate

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

capabilities such as SSL handling, content-aware routing, and request throttling, strengthening security and dependability while streamlining backend development.

Message queues facilitate non-synchronous communication between system parts, boosting durability and growth potential by severing direct service connections. These middleware components store messages between senders and receivers, allowing parts to function independently at varying processing rates. The separation created by message systems establishes natural failure containment within distributed environments, blocking cascading breakdowns when individual services malfunction. Burns and Oppenheimer note in their container architecture research [8] that message queues serve as essential structural elements for fault-tolerant distributed systems, particularly within microservice frameworks where minimal coupling between separately deployable components becomes essential. Current message queue systems deliver sophisticated features, including guaranteed message delivery, precise-once processing guarantees, and intricate routing configurations enabling adaptable system arrangements.

Distributed databases maintain information across numerous machines while preserving consistency levels appropriate for application needs. These platforms incorporate advanced partitioning, replication, and agreement mechanisms, delivering scalable, durable data storage. The progression of distributed database technology has generated specialized solutions tailored for various data structures and usage patterns, spanning document repositories and key-value stores to graph databases and chronological information platforms. Schiper's investigation into group communication protocols [7] offers valuable perspectives regarding the consensus mechanisms supporting these systems, specifically addressing membership shifts and network divisions while safeguarding data accuracy. Companies increasingly embrace diverse persistence approaches utilizing multiple specialized databases within individual applications, choosing suitable technologies based on particular data characteristics and retrieval requirements.

Service discovery allows services to identify and interact with each other dynamically, where network addresses frequently change. These mechanisms establish the groundwork for elastic scaling and automatic recovery by maintaining updated service registries that track available instances and their network locations. Modern service discovery implementations include health verification, load consideration, and metadata administration capabilities supporting sophisticated request routing. Burns and Oppenheimer identify within their container system pattern analysis [8] that effective discovery frameworks must address both planned modifications (scaling events, version upgrades) and unexpected changes (component failures, network segmentation) with minimal disruption to applications. The combination of service discovery with container management platforms has reduced implementation complexity while improving capabilities, bringing dynamic service arrangements within reach for more organizations.

API gateways establish unified access points for clients while directing requests to appropriate backend services following defined rules and policies. These components handle critical cross-cutting responsibilities, including authentication, request limiting, transformation, and response caching, simplifying backend services through centralizing common functionality. Contemporary API gateways incorporate advanced traffic management features, including phased deployments, circuit protection, and request mirroring, enabling controlled release procedures. Schiper's contributions regarding dynamic group communication [7] provide theoretical foundations explaining how gateways sustain consistent perspectives on backend service arrangements despite continuous infrastructure changes. The modern technology of API gateway has developed advanced platforms that enable declarative configuration,

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

monitoring, and integration, along with the automated enforcement of rules that cut across service boundaries.

A combination of all these infrastructure elements creates the platform that distributed apps run on, providing resilience, scaling, and flexibility in their execution environments needed in contemporary cloud environments. Granted, separate components can be applied to solve certain problems, but they acquire real value when implemented into coherent architectures that combine their complementary capabilities. Burns and Oppenheimer confirm in their analysis of container-based systems [8] that these parts need to work together to solve common issues like configuration management, application management, and monitoring performance, forming complete platforms instead of disparate technologies. With ongoing incremental improvement in these components, the implementation threshold continues to drop; meanwhile, the capability increases, making advanced distributed development within the reach of many organizations.

Component	Primary Function	Resilience Contribution	Implementation Complexity	Scalability Impact
Load Balancers	Traffic distribution	High (fault isolation)	Medium	High
Message Queues	Asynchronous communication	High (decoupling)	Medium	High
Distributed Databases	Data storage	Medium	High	Medium
Service Discovery	Dynamic service location	Medium	Medium	High
API Gateways	Unified access point	Low	Low	Medium

Table 2: Critical Infrastructure Components for Distributed Systems [7, 8]

5. Real-world Applications

Distributed systems serve as the driving force behind many business-critical applications in industries, and they have turned theory into practice, with both scale and complexity that have never been experienced before. These applications illustrate the application of the distributed architecture principles in solving real-life situations that have needs for high availability, fault tolerance, and scalability in performance. The above discussion of these applications gives us an idea of how to design and implement effective distributed system applications.

Search engines process countless queries across massively distributed indexes, representing perhaps the most visible application of distributed systems principles. Such platforms have already integrated highly designed architectures that distribute search indexes on thousands of computers yet still maintain sub-second query turnaround times. Due to the distributed nature of search infrastructure, scaling may be done horizontally to cope with larger amounts of data and vertically by being fault-tolerant to keep the system up even in the case of component failure. As Barroso, Hölzle, and Ranganathan describe in their comprehensive analysis of warehouse-scale computing [9], modern search architectures employ multi-tiered designs distributing different aspects of information retrieval across specialized subsystems, including crawling, indexing, query processing, and result ranking. These systems demonstrate practical implementations of distributed computing principles, including consistent hashing for data partitioning,

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

massive parallel processing for query execution, and sophisticated caching hierarchies that collectively enable information retrieval at a planetary scale.

E-commerce platforms handle fluctuating traffic while maintaining consistent inventory and transaction processing, particularly during high-volume shopping events, creating extreme load spikes. These systems implement sophisticated distributed architectures combining caching, queuing, and database sharding to maintain performance under variable load conditions. Analyses of consistency models in distributed databases [10] reveal e-commerce platforms often implement hybrid consistency approaches applying strong consistency guarantees to critical operations, including inventory management and payment processing, while using eventual consistency for less critical functions, including product recommendations and review displays. Modern implementations typically separate read and write paths with different consistency models, creating systems maintaining correctness guarantees for business-critical operations while optimizing performance for high-volume read operations tolerating some staleness.

Financial systems process transactions with strong consistency guarantees across global networks, representing some of the most demanding distributed system implementations. These platforms must maintain strict data integrity and audit capabilities while processing millions of transactions per second with minimal latency. Barroso and colleagues note [9] that financial systems represent a primary use case for strong consistency models, implementing sophisticated consensus protocols and distributed transaction mechanisms ensuring operation atomicity across distributed components. The architectural patterns employed often utilize two-phase commit protocols or more advanced consensus mechanisms guaranteeing transaction integrity despite component failures or network partitions. These implementations demonstrate how theoretical principles, including linearizability and serializability, create practical solutions for mission-critical applications with stringent regulatory requirements.

Content delivery networks distribute media and web assets across global edge locations, bringing data closer to users while reducing the origin server load. These distributed systems implement sophisticated caching, routing, and invalidation mechanisms, balancing performance optimization with content freshness requirements. As explained in analyses of consistency models [10], CDNs typically implement eventual consistency approaches prioritizing availability and performance while providing mechanisms for controlled content invalidation when updates occur. Modern CDNs implement complex hierarchical caching topologies with tiered invalidation protocols propagating changes through the network while maintaining availability during partial failures. These systems demonstrate practical applications of eventual consistency delivering substantial performance and availability benefits while providing mechanisms enforcing freshness when required.

Ticketing services manage concurrent access to limited inventory during high-demand events, creating challenging distributed systems problems around data consistency and concurrency control. These platforms must prevent overselling while maximizing throughput during extreme demand spikes that potentially exceed available inventory by orders of magnitude. Barroso and colleagues identify [9] inventory management systems, including ticketing platforms, as applications requiring careful consistency model selection based on business requirements and user expectations. Modern implementations typically implement strong consistency models for inventory state while employing optimistic concurrency control mechanisms, maximizing throughput during normal operations. These systems demonstrate how theoretical consistency models translate into practical business guarantees, balancing performance optimization against strict correctness requirements for inventory-constrained operations.

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

These real-life applications are the ways by which the principles of distributed systems are applied to effective, practical solutions to hard business problems. The patterns emerging in these individual areas are still similar in the management of fault tolerance, scalability, and consistency, building a basis on such an architecture. The ongoing process of development of these systems suggests either a strong grip on the usefulness of underlying ideas of distributed systems or a necessity to apply principles to particular applications, implementation needs, and contexts. As highlighted in discussions of consistency models [10], successful distributed system implementations typically select appropriate consistency guarantees based on specific application semantics rather than applying uniform approaches across all operations. This nuanced approach enables systems to maintain critical correctness guarantees while optimizing performance for operations tolerating relaxed consistency models.

Application	Primary Consistency Model	Scale (QPS)	Fault Tolerance Priority	Key Distributed Patterns
Search Engines	Eventual	Very High	Medium	Sharding, Caching, Parallel processing
E-commerce	Hybrid (Strong/Eventual)	High (variable)	High	CQRS, Queuing, Sharding
Financial Systems	Strong	High	Very High	Consensus protocols, Redundancy
CDNs	Eventual	Very High	Medium	Edge caching, Hierarchical invalidation
Ticketing Services	Strong for inventory	Medium (spiky)	High	Optimistic concurrency, Rate limiting

Table 3: Consistency Models in Real-World Distributed Applications [9, 10]

Conclusion

When it was originally conceived, a distributed system was merely a conceptual theory that embodied no practical implementations. Over time, it has become a fundamental ingredient in the current digital infrastructure, serving as a backbone to important application use cases of various industries and providing scale and resiliency never experienced. These principles described in this article consist of models of consistency, replication strategies, fault tolerance mechanisms, and protocols of consensus, all of which offer the basis for the construction of systems that resist the failures of their components and continue to exhibit coherent behavior. The transformation to the cloud is on the agenda of organizations, and as they continue their transformation processes, the concepts and the knowledge around them are becoming more important to the technology professional who is expected to design and implement a distributed scheme. The patterns in infrastructure and design discussed here are practical in solving the typical distributed computing problems, and real-life applications show how the concepts can be applied in business terms. Through relevant modeling of consistencies, well-thought-out replication plans, effective fault-tolerance schemes, and other infrastructure-based components, engineers are capable of designing distributed systems that can distribute their services reliably and scalably to users worldwide in a graceful manner that is capable of overcoming the complexity of their distributed environment. A

10.48047/jocaaa.2025.34.12.43

command of these concepts in the organizations allows the architectures to be constructed towards not only accommodating the existing needs but flexible towards adapting future needs within the highly distributed computing environment.

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