How to keep track of scraping job in asynchronous Scrapy world.

One of the typical tasks is to scrape a big aggregator site, which contains tens or even hundreds of thousands records, contractors or firms data, for example. Such big sites often have the following features:

- search capability input box

- categories (of contractors or firms) pages

- firm listing page

- paging links (on firm listing pages)

- individual firm pages

Throughout the article, we will use a fancy “Who supplies what” aggregator site example

In this article, we will cover the topics that are not usually highlighted in the mans:

1. How to maintain persistency across scraping sessions

2. How to establish a good reporting during (and between) sessions.

What do we mean by persistency and why it is important.

If we’re talking about scraping a site, which contains hundreds of thousands records, **it is unlikely that we will do all our job in a single session**. Several reasons may be for that – perhaps we want to inspect the portion of the data collected before proceeding further (which is definitely a good practice!) or we know that, if we exceed some amount of requests the site will temporary ban us so we need to stop and recharge the session after waiting some time, etc.

That is why we need to maintain persistency in our scraper - to be able to start exactly from the point where we finished before. This way we need the mechanisms to handle the following use cases:

- skip already processed categories

- skip already processed pages within firm listing of a category

- avoid duplicates in scraped items

Of course, we must consider the situation when we suddenly broke our session on whatever step of our process. Never can we expect that data or webpages are always even and therefore we may expect at every point an error, which we could not ever imagine. Most likely, we will get a sudden stop while processing a page, which can be illustrated with the following diagram:

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| Category 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Category 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Category 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Page 1 | | | | Page 2 | | | | Page 3 | | | | Page 4 | | | | Page 1 | | | | | | Page 2 | | | | | | Page 3 | | | | | | Page 4 | | | | | | Page 5 | | | | | | Page 1 | | | | Page 2 | | | | Page 3 | | | | Page 4 | | | |
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Suppose we broke down here

(last saved item is 3)

Based on this picture, when we respawn our scraping session, obviously we should:

- entirely skip Category 1 – this is what the first use case is about

- skip pages from 1 to 3 of the Category 2 – this is the second use case

- avoid duplicates of firms 1, 2, 3 when we started from uncompleted Page 4 – this is the use case 3.

The latter use case – duplicates filter – every scraper usually implements, because almost no customer would like to have duplicates in their data.

The importance of a good reporting is evident. The best thing we may expect from reporting is to try to predict when we finish, maybe not in terms of hours and minutes, but just how much work we did not complete yet. But scraper reporting is a consequence of persistency – we are already collecting a lot of “job state” information to maintain the former, so basically it is our choice what job state information to show and where we are not starting to be too verbose.

Mechanisms to recognize when a specific condition occurs.

Mechanisms to load a saved job state to start scraper from the point we finished before.

For most efficiency, I will consider them in pairs: recognize and save – load for restart.

Scrapy developers provided us convenient thing called CrawlSpider, which is a subclass of a “plain” one and which introduces very important concept of **Rules**. When we are crawling on the site, we use site hyperlinks for that. Therefore we need, as a first step of our scraping, to collect them somehow. This job is already done for us and this is what **Rules** are about. We just specify css or xpath criteria to find hyperlinks (thus define a Rule) and CrawlSpider extracts appropriate hyperlinks for us and emits corresponding requests.

Rules play important role in realization of the mechanisms mentioned above.

How the requests from Rules put in a queue!!

Packet conception

Information on websites is always divided by pages. The most important building block for us is to know when a page is completed.

Not so easy in an asynchronous Scrapy world

By default, Scrapy CrawlSpider uses deep-first traversal. Last in – first out. Therefore if we want do discover the last page as soon as possible, **put paging rule at the bottom of the rules list**.

Count item processed

We know from which page and category item came from

We know how many items are on page.

if firmasOnPage == item['linksGot']

means page is completed

When the completed page is the last page in a category.

There is no “next page” link – that means we are on the last page of the firma listing

While scraping a big aggregator site often it is good idea to have clear reporting about

what your scraper is doing at the moment and

from which query and category the data it scraped came.

Suppose we have an aggregator site with search input box. We enter some pattern, "print" for example and the site responded with let's say "refined" categories it contains, which may relate to our word "print":

Printing machines

3-D printing

Textile print

Offset print

... etc

Next, every category links to an index page, which contains a listing of the firms related to that category.

Last step is to go to each firm's individual page and grab all data related to this firm.

But what if the customer asks to save, within each firm record also an initial query which leaded to this firm ("print" in our example), along with category name (“Printing machines" in our case)? That would make sense. Or, it may be some information exists on an index page (total amount of firms per category or something else), which is also worth to save in a data output.

Actually we cannot save such information in our spider instance fields - please remember that Scrapy is an asynchronous tool and it seemed very easy to get lost among flows of "packets". Every response would save to these fields in a random order so we will have there anything, except actual data!

How to deal with this issue in our unpredictable world? Thanks God, Scrapy developers provide special dictionary, request.meta and response.meta exactly for this purpose, along with some useful info every request and response carry on the board. The idea behind is the same like in computer networks - there every packet is traveling across the net independently among milliards of them, but every one has special labels so routers or computers alongside the path know how to handle a packet and every recipient knows how to reassemble them into a message exactly the same as sender wanted to tell.

For better understanding, let's recall how Scrapy would work on our project and where we can catch the flows of requests/responses to keep track on them.

We will subclass not from "plain" spider but from CrawlerSpider, which deals with any sort of "index pages" in a more convenient way.

The crawler reads start\_urls value

It makes initial request to start url

The response received is passed to link extractors for eating

If a rule of link extractor triggers, the spider emits a request for this link.

Now, if we specified a callback procedure - that means that we reached the target firm details page and can create information item and fill it with data scraped.

Opposite, if callback did not set, we assume that a new page requested by the link is again a some sort of an index page. The scraper then follows the link and again apply the set of its link extractor rules to the response.

start\_urls = [www.example.com/querypage?q=print]

Request

Response - refined categories page

Rule 0: on the category page extract links to index pages;

Rule 1: on the index page extract links to individual firms;

Rule 2: on the index page extract links to next index page.

Rule 0 triggers - request to index page is emited, with label meta['rule'] = 0

We receive a response with index page and again, we feed it to our 3 Rules

This time, Rule 1 triggers - request to individual firm page is emmited with with label meta['rule'] = 1

Because we set a callback for Rule 1, the response is transferred to data scraping procedure. No more requests will spawn from this chain, we've got data!

(Optional) In case the index is spreaded over multiple pages, Rule 2 triggers, next index page fetched, where again the process with Rule 1 - Rule 2 repeats.

You can imagine how huge the amount of chains may be!

If page already seen - add special flag to response, which will prohibit Rule 1 from being activated.

For totals count and for-updates scraping: table which item id was seen on which category and page. Ids allowed to duplicate. Later on, during update scraping, spider will load a page with seen elements for every active chain.