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Visual Formulation of Smart Contracts on Blockchains

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Abstract

This project focuses on making it easy for both developers and non-developers to develop smart contracts for solidity on the Ethereum blockchain. Our tool, the Smart Contract Builder, visually represents and simplifies the concepts in blockchain, which is still in its infancy. Graphical objects and diagrams are used to represent code and logic, which will allow quicker prototyping of smart contracts. The Smart Contract Builder also allows easy deployment of smart contract code on to the blockchain with the click of a button. We also examine the performance and gas usage of a smart contract buil1MMMMMMMMMM M

Contents Page

1. Introduction **6**
1.1 Background 6
1.2 Objectives and Scope 6

2. Literature Review **8**
2.1 Blockchain 8
2.1.1 Public Blockchains 9
2.1.2 Private and Consortium Blockchains 9
2.2 Smart Contracts 10
2.3 Solidity Programming Language 10
2.3 Terminology used 11
2.3.1 Events 11
2.3.2 Gas 11
2.3.3 Application Binary Interface 12
2.3.4 ERC-20 Token 12
2.4 Related Work 13

3. Development and Implementation **14**
3.1 Software And Tools Used 14
3.1.1 React and Electron 14
3.1.2 Additional packages 14
3.1.3 Remix IDE 15
3.1.4 Hardware 15
3.2 Project Schedule 15
3.3 Implementation 16
3.3.1 Targeted Feature Scope 16
3.3.2 Design 17
3.3.2.1 Connection Page 18
3.3.2.2 Global State Tab 18
3.3.2.2.1 Events Box 19
3.3.2.2.2 Entities Box 20
3.3.2.2.3 Constructor Parameters Box 21
3.3.2.3 Build Tabs 22
3.3.2.3.1 Function Input Box 23
3.3.2.3.2 Checking Phase Box 24
3.3.2.3.3 Action Phase Box 24
3.3.3 Backend Logic 28
3.3.3.1 BuildParser 28
3.3.3.2 BuildOptions 29
3.3.3.2.1 Code Generation 30

3.3.3.2.2 Contract Compilation and Deployment 30
3.3.3.2.3 Saving and Loading Mechanism 31

4. Evaluation of Results 32
4.1 Methodology of evaluation 32
4.2 Results 32
4.2.1 Flexibility 32
4.2.1.1 Voting 33
4.2.1.2 Open Auction 34
4.2.1.3 Blind Auction 34
4.2.1.4 Safe Remote Purchase 35
4.2.1.5 Micropayments Receiver and Payment Channel 35
4.2.1.6 Modular Contracts 35
4.2.1.7 ERC20 Token 36
4.2.2 Performance 36
4.2.2.1 Results for Open Auction Smart Contract 36
4.2.2.2 Results for Safe Remote Purchase Contract 37
4.2.2.3 Results for Voting Smart Contract 38
4.2.2.4 Results for ERC20 Token 39
4.3 Findings 39

5. Conclusions 41

6. Recommendations 42

7. End Section 43
7.1 Appendices 43
Appendix A: Structure of a Solidity Smart Contract 43
Appendix B: Voting Build Tabs 45
Global State Tab 45
Constructor Function 45
Add Proposal Function 46
Give Right To Vote Function 47
Vote Function 48
Winning Proposal Function 48
Appendix C: Open Auction Build Tabs 49
Global State Tab 49
Constructor Function 50
Bid Function 51
Withdraw Function 51
Auction End Function 52
Appendix D: Safe Remote Purchase 53
Global State Tab 53
Constructor Function 54

Abort Function 54
Confirm Purchase Function 55
Confirm Received Function 55
Appendix E: ERC20 Token 56
Global State Tab for ERC20 56
Transfer Function 56
Approve Function 57
Transfer From Function 58
Increase Allowance Function 58
Decrease Allowance Function 59
Appendix F: Code Generated by Smart Contract Builder for Open Auction 60
Appendix G: Code Generated by Smart Contract Builder for Safe Remote Purchase 62
Appendix H: Code Generated by Smart Contract Builder for Voting 64
Appendix I: Code Generated by Smart Contract Builder for ERC20 Token 66
7.2 References 68

List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 3.1: Project Schedule	16
Figure 3.2: Screenshot of Connection Page	19
Figure 3.3: Screenshot of Global State Tab	20
Figure 3.4: Screenshot of an event	21
Figure 3.5: Screenshot of an entity	22
Figure 3.6: Initial State Tab's example inputs	23
Figure 3.7: Global State Tab's Constructor Parameters Corresponding to Figure 3.6	23
Figure 3.8: Example "Purchase" Build Tab	24
Table 3.1: Modal appearance and options for all node types	25-28
Figure 3.9: Example of while loop detected due to cycle	30
Figure 3.10: Example of Ganache CLI Deployment Message	31
Figure 4.1: Initial Voting Constructor	34
Figure 4.2: Changed Voting Constructor with addProposal Function	35
Table 4.1: Comparison of performance with reference contract for Open Auction	38
Table 4.2: Comparison of performance with reference contract for Safe Remote Purchase	38-39
Table 4.3: Comparison of performance with reference contract for Voting	40

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

A blockchain is an open-source distributed database using state-of-the-art cryptography that aims to facilitate collaboration and tracking of all kinds of transactions and interactions. Ever since its conceptualisation in 2008, many organisations have been undertaking heavy research in order to unlock its potential. Despite the many performance related concerns that it has, it is widely viewed as an important part of the future of commercial transactions.

Because blockchain technology is still in its infancy, there are many different implementations, and the technology is still evolving rapidly. As a result, blockchain technology is still a very niche field that is intimidating to developers and non-developers alike. In order to simplify development on existing blockchains, we propose an application called Smart Contract Builder. The Smart Contract Builder application targets the Ethereum implementation of smart contracts, and uses the Solidity language. We believe that this application will simplify and encourage development on the blockchain, even by non-developers.

1.2 Objectives and Scope

The objective of this project is to create a graphical user interface tool that makes it easy for both developers and non-developers to create and deploy smart contracts. As blockchain and smart contracts are still new concepts, most people will not be able to develop smart contracts effectively due to the steep learning curve and relatively small community. By abstracting the code layer from the user as much as possible, we believe that this tool will encourage users to build on the blockchain, which will also increase the enthusiasm and competence around this revolutionary technology.

The scope of the project will not only cover the understanding of how smart contracts work but also how to write smart contracts. Because this tool is only a prototype, we

will only focus on one language.In the future, further work can be done to extend the implementation to other languages and other blockchains.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Blockchain

A blockchain is a growing list of records, called blocks, which are linked using cryptography. Each block contains a cryptographic hash of the previous block, a timestamp, and transaction data (generally represented as a merkle tree root hash). By design, a blockchain is resistant to modification of the data. It is "an open, distributed ledger that can record transactions between two parties efficiently and in a verifiable and permanent way". For use as a distributed ledger, a blockchain is typically managed by a peer-to-peer network collectively adhering to a protocol for inter-node communication and validating new blocks. Once recorded, the data in any given block cannot be altered retroactively without alteration of all subsequent blocks, which requires consensus of the network majority. Although blockchain records are not unalterable, blockchains may be considered secure by design and exemplify a distributed computing system with high Byzantine fault tolerance. Decentralized consensus has therefore been claimed with a blockchain. [1]
Blockchain was initially invented by a person going by the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto in 2008. The invention of blockchain for bitcoin made it the first digital currency to solve the double spending problem without needing central servers. [2]
When entrepreneurs understood the power of blockchain, there was a surge of investment and discovery to see how blockchain could impact supply chains, healthcare, insurance, transportation, voting, contract management and more. Nearly 15% of financial institutions are currently using blockchain technology. In 2013, Vitalik Buterin, who was an initial contributor to the Bitcoin codebase, became frustrated with its programming limitations and pushed for a malleable blockchain. Met with resistance from the Bitcoin community, Buterin set out to build the second public blockchain called Ethereum. The largest difference between the two is that Ethereum can record other assets such as loans or contracts, not just currency.
There are 3 types of blockchain: public, private and consortium blockchains. [3]

2.1.1 Public Blockchains

Public blockchains (the likes of Bitcoin and Ethereum) are essentially everyone's to control. They put out no entry restrictions. They permit everybody, save for those not connected to the web, to access and even manage the networks, provided that the validators deposit some internal or external resources into securing them.
What public chains prohibit, however, is one's complete authority. No single entity can write to such a network's history unless the nodes, who participate in the consensus process, decide the entry is valid.
The security, which public chains are most praised for, is achieved by clever application of crypto economics. They use algorithms such as Proof of Work and Proof of Stake to prevent malicious activities and offer financial incentives for miners (validators) willing to establish the protection.
They concern themselves above all with providing transparency and anonymity. They regard efficiency (and scalability) as features of secondary importance.

2.1.2 Private and Consortium Blockchains

Consortium and private blockchains have a slightly different focus. They're designed not to expose to the whole world the record of transactions which they store. And they are managed, much more effectively than their public counterparts, by a limited number of nodes.
Consortium and private blockchains are only different in one way. The former are governed by a group of corporations (say a consortium of banks), while the latter are maintained by a single firm. The purpose of these chains, unlike that of public ones, is not to reinvent the existing business processes, but to complement them.
Financial institutions and large-scale corporations alike can exchange assets using the blockchains technology, thus not having to pay an intermediary and having these transactions settled within seconds. They also might monitor the private peer-to-peer networks in real time, whenever they need to.

2.2 Smart Contracts

A smart contract is computer code that verifies and ensures that the terms of a contract are carried out to the satisfaction of all parties. While a standard contract outlines the terms of a relationship (usually one enforceable by law), a smart contract enforces a relationship with cryptographic code. First conceived in 1993, the idea was originally described by computer scientist and cryptographer Nick Szabo as a kind of digital vending machine. In his famous example, he described how users could input data or value, and receive a finite item from a machine, in this case a real-world snack or a soft drink. [4]

It's worth noting that bitcoin was the first to support basic smart contracts in the sense that the network can transfer value from one person to another. The network of nodes will only validate transactions if certain conditions are met. But bitcoin is limited to the currency use case. By contrast, ethereum replaces bitcoin's more restrictive language (a scripting language of a hundred or so scripts) and replaces it with a language that allows developers to write their own programs. Ethereum allows developers to program their own smart contracts, or 'autonomous agents', as the ethereum white paper calls them. The language is 'Turing-complete'. [5]

Smart contracts can:

- Function as 'multi-signature' accounts, so that funds are spent only when a required percentage of people agree
- Manage agreements between users, say, if one buys insurance from the other
- Provide utility to other contracts (similar to how a software library works)
- Store information about an application, such as domain registration information or membership records.

2.3 Solidity Programming Language

Solidity is an object-oriented, high-level language for implementing smart contracts. Smart contracts are programs which govern the behaviour of accounts within the Ethereum state.

Solidity was influenced by C++, Python and JavaScript and is designed to target the Ethereum Virtual Machine (EVM).
Solidity is statically typed, supports inheritance, libraries and complex user-defined types among other features. [6]
The Ethereum Virtual machine essentially creates a level of abstraction between the executing code and the executing machine. This layer is needed to improve the portability of software, as well as to make sure applications are separated from each other, and separated from their host. Smart contract languages like Solidity cannot be executed by the EVM directly. Instead, they are compiled to low-level machine instructions (called opcodes). Under the hood, the EVM uses a set of instructions (called opcodes) to execute specific tasks. At the time of writing, there are 140 unique opcodes. Together, these opcodes allow the EVM to be Turing-complete. [7]

2.3 Terminology used

The following section explains some important Solidity, Ethereum or smart contract related terms that will be used later in this document.

2.3.1 Events

Solidity events give an abstraction on top of the EVM's logging functionality. Applications can subscribe and listen to these events through the RPC interface of an Ethereum client.
Events are inheritable members of contracts. When blockchain nodes emit events, they cause the arguments to be stored in the transaction's log - a special data structure in the blockchain. These logs are associated with the address of the contract, are incorporated into the blockchain, and stay there as long as a block is accessible. [8]

2.3.2 Gas

Gas is a unit that measures the amount of computational effort that it will take to execute certain operations. Every single operation that takes part in Ethereum, be it a simple transaction, or a smart contract, or even an ICO takes some amount of gas.

Gas is what is used to calculate the amount of fees that need to be paid to the network in order to execute an operation. [9]

2.3.3 Application Binary Interface

The Contract Application Binary Interface (ABI) is the standard way to interact with contracts in the Ethereum ecosystem, both from outside the blockchain and for contract-to-contract interaction. [10] The solc compiler will compile Solidity code into ABI which can then be used directly with the Ethereum blockchain.

2.3.4 ERC-20 Token

Tokens, in the context of cryptocurrency, represent digital assets that can have a variety of values attached. They can represent assets as diverse as vouchers, IOUs, or even objects in the real world. In this way, tokens are essentially smart contracts that make use of the Ethereum blockchain. One of the most significant token standards of all for Ethereum is called ERC-20.

The ERC-20 defines a common list of rules for all Ethereum tokens to follow, meaning that this particular token empowers developers of all types to accurately predict how new tokens will function within the larger Ethereum system. The impact that ERC-20 therefore has on developers is massive, as projects do not need to be redone each time a new token is released. Rather, they are designed to be compatible with new tokens, provided those tokens adhere to the rules. Developers of new tokens have by-and-large observed the ERC-20 rules, meaning that most of the tokens released through Ethereum initial coin offerings are ERC-20 compliant.

ERC-20 defines six different functions for the benefit of other tokens within the Ethereum system. These are generally basic functionality issues, including how tokens are transferred and how users can access data about a token. ERC-20 also prescribes two different signals that each token takes on and which other tokens are attuned to.

Put together, this set of functions and signals ensures that Ethereum tokens of different types will typically work the same in any place within the Ethereum system.

This means that almost all of the wallets which support the ether currency also support ERC-20 compliant tokens. [11]

2.4 Related Work

At the moment, there are no existing popular graphical user interface applications catering to new developers or non-developers. Command line tools such as Truffle exist to help developers create and deploy smart contracts. However, these are targeted at experienced developers who are comfortable with the command line. Furthermore, with these tools only aiding with the structure, deployment and testing of smart contract code, the user is still required to write a significant amount of code on their own. There are also tools such as MetaMask which allow users to interact with smart contracts and manage their wallets, but this does not conflict with the objective of our application. There are similar tools to the Smart Contract Builder for other fields such as Tableau for Big Data Visualisation and SAS for data science and business analytics. However, since Ethereum and blockchain in general are still very new, most open source effort is going into making blockchain more viable and efficient rather than making development accessible to non-technical users.

3. Development and Implementation

3.1 Software And Tools Used

3.1.1 React and Electron

In order to build the Smart Contract Builder, the Electron and React frameworks were chosen.
Electron is an increasingly popular framework due to its compatibility across platforms, and enables developers to create their user interfaces with HTML and JavaScript. Well known examples of other Electron applications include Slack, GitHub and Microsoft Visual Studio Code. [12]
React is a popular front-end framework developed by Facebook to allow for responsive web interfaces through the Virtual DOM. Well known examples of React users are: Facebook, Instagram, Netflix, Whatsapp, Salesforce, Uber, The New York Times, CNN, Dropbox, DailyMotion, IMDB, Venmo, and Reddit. [13]
Electron React Boilerplate was used to set up the initial packages for the project. It uses Electron, React, Redux, React Router, Webpack and React Hot Loader for rapid application development. [14]

3.1.2 Additional packages

In addition, the solc compiler, Ganache CLI and web3 packages are used. Solc, the Solidity compiler, is used to compile Solidity smart contract code into machine readable code. Ganache CLI is used to simulate full client blockchain behaviour to enable quicker prototyping of the application, and Web3 is used to interact with the blockchain in order to deploy the smart contract and call its functions. Ganache CLI runs on http://localhost:8545 by default.
Material-UI, a React library that follows Google's material design, is also used to create a simple yet powerful graphical user interface.

The Storm React Diagrams library was also used to provide the drag and drop diagramming functionality needed by the Graphical User Interface. This library is relatively simple to use and includes important features such as serialization and deserialization of the diagrams, as well as extensibility of the nodes to enable custom features.

3.1.3 Remix IDE

Remix IDE allows compilation and testing of smart contracts through the browser. We use Remix IDE's static analysis tool to obtain the gas usage for smart contracts in order to compare their performance and efficiency in a fair manner.

3.1.4 Hardware

The application was built on a personal computer running 64 bit Linux Ubuntu 18.04, with 8GB of RAM and an Intel(R) Core(TM) i7-3770 CPU @ 3.40GHz processor. It has also been tested on a Windows machine with 8GB of RAM and an Intel Core i5 (4th Gen) 4210U @ 1.7 GHz processor.

3.2 Project Schedule

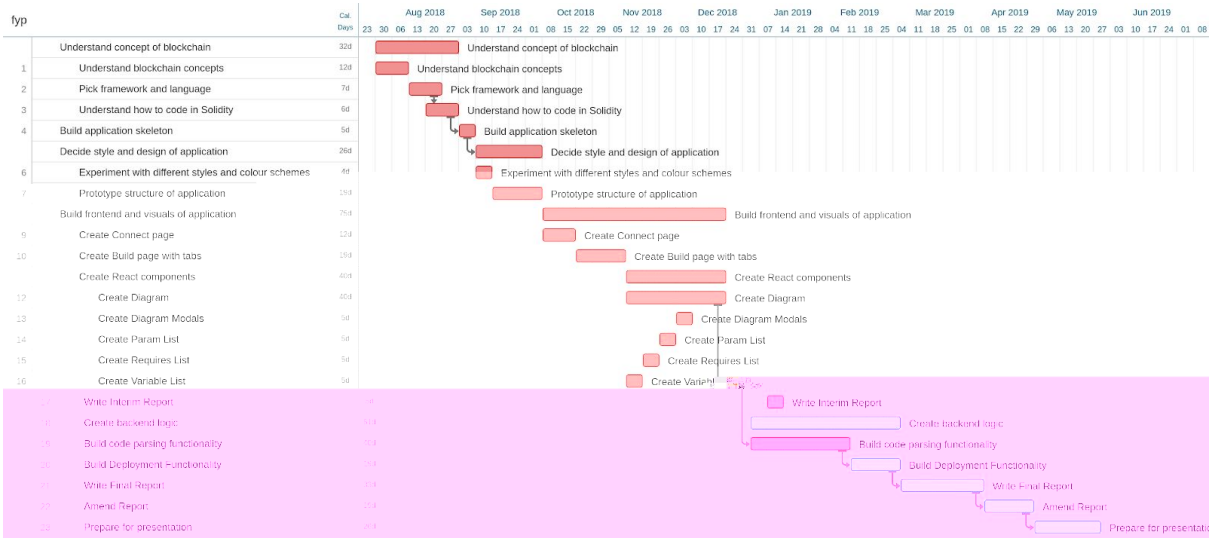


Figure 3.1: Project schedule

The work was planned in this manner to allow for rapid prototyping of the application. By quickly creating a rough skeleton of the application, we were able to iterate and improve on our designs. We built the frontend first as we felt that the main challenge of the project is making the app usable and attractive to use. Once the frontend was completed, we created the backend logic which includes the parser, code generation and code deployment. Once completed, we used reference contracts from Solidity documentation and source code available on GitHub to model using the Smart Contract Builder and we were able to test the contracts generated on Remix IDE and compare the results.

3.3 Implementation

In this section, a full account of how the project work was carried out is given.

3.3.1 Targeted Feature Scope

In order to prevent over cluttering and over complication of the user interface, we chose to only implement the basic functionality of Solidity contracts, as our target audience, consisting largely of non-developers or developers new to blockchain and Solidity, are not advanced users and are unlikely to require the overly advanced features of Solidity.

The following is a list of Solidity features or constructs that have been implemented and included in the Smart Contract Builder:

- Variable assignment
- Basic variable types (integer, string, address, boolean)
- Mapping variable type and nested mapping
- Logical if/else and while loop constructs
- Events
- Structs (known as “Entities” in the Smart Contract Builder)
- Require statements
- Transfer function

This list is not exhaustive but covers the core functionality of the Smart Contract Builder. The implementation of these features will be covered in the next section, Section 3.3.2.

The following list shows some Solidity features that will not be included in the Smart Contract Builder:

- For loops
- Bit operations
- Arrays
- Modifiers
- Enumerators
- Self Destruct
- Libraries

These are some features that we think will create too much complexity for the Smart Contract Builder. Some of these features are replaceable with some of the features that we have implemented. For example, an array of strings can be modeled as a mapping of index to the strings and modifiers can be modelled as require statements. By not adding these features, we avoid creating unnecessary confusion and clutter for the user.

3.3.2 Design

The design of the application was intended to be as simple and non-intimidating as possible. In the initial stages, we rapidly prototyped the application and tested different styles and appearances so as to find out which design would be the most appealing and least intimidating to the user. We settled on a white and blue colour scheme as the colour blue is associated with calmness while the colour white is associated with cleanliness and simplicity. [15]

The Smart Contract Builder has 3 main components that the user should take note of: the connection page, the Global State Tab and the Build Tabs. The Build page contains the Global State Tab and the Build Tabs. It also has the following buttons at the bottom of the page:

- Back button to return the user to the connection page

- Save button which saves the user's current progress
- Load button which loads the user's previously saved progress
- Generate contract button which generates and saves the generated Solidity contract
- Deploy button which generates the smart contract and deploys it to the connected blockchain

The Smart Contract Builder also heavily uses tooltips to guide and help the user.

3.3.2.1 Connection Page

The smart contract builder's landing page is a connection screen. Users will enter the address and port of the blockchain in order to connect to it. For example, to connect to Ganache CLI, the address should be localhost and the port should be 8545, based on default Ganache CLI settings. Connecting to a valid blockchain will bring the user to the second page, the Build page, which contains the Global State Tab and the Build Tabs.

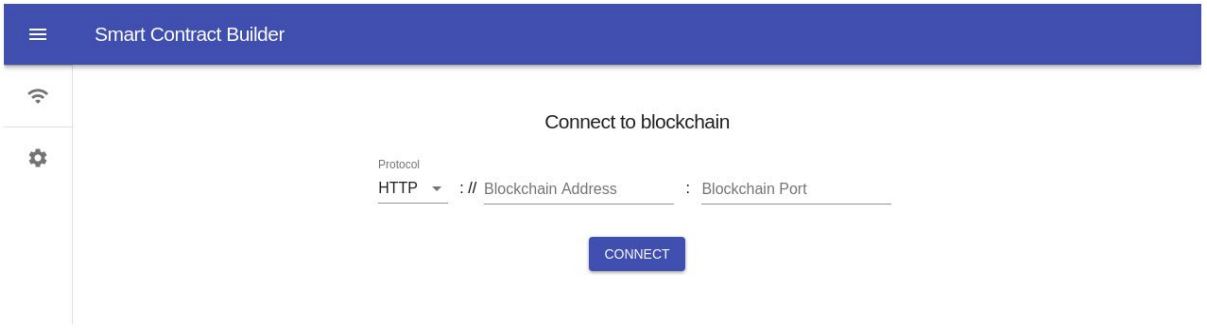


Figure 3.2: Screenshot of Connection Page

3.3.2.2 Global State Tab

The Global State Tab represents details of the smart contract that are not tied to any functions, namely, events and constructor variable declarations.

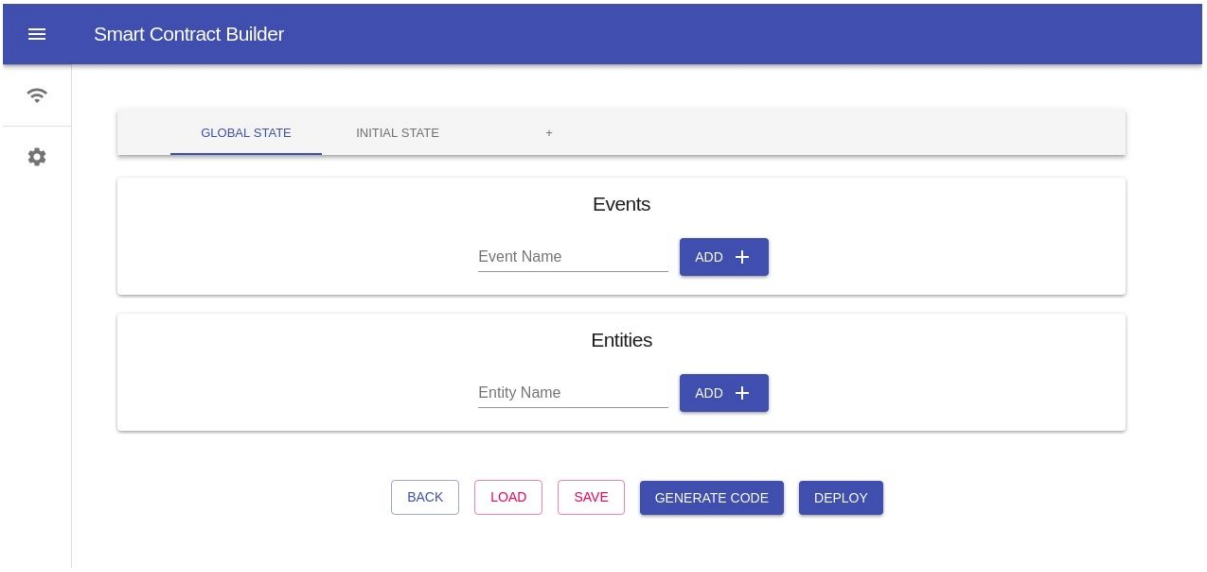


Figure 3.3: Screenshot of Global State Tab

3.3.2.2.1 Events Box

In the Smart Contract Builder, users declare events by typing the event name and clicking the add button. The events appear above the box and the user can add and customise the event's parameters. These events can be emitted in the Build Tabs. An elaboration of emitting events will be covered in Section 3.3.2.3.3.

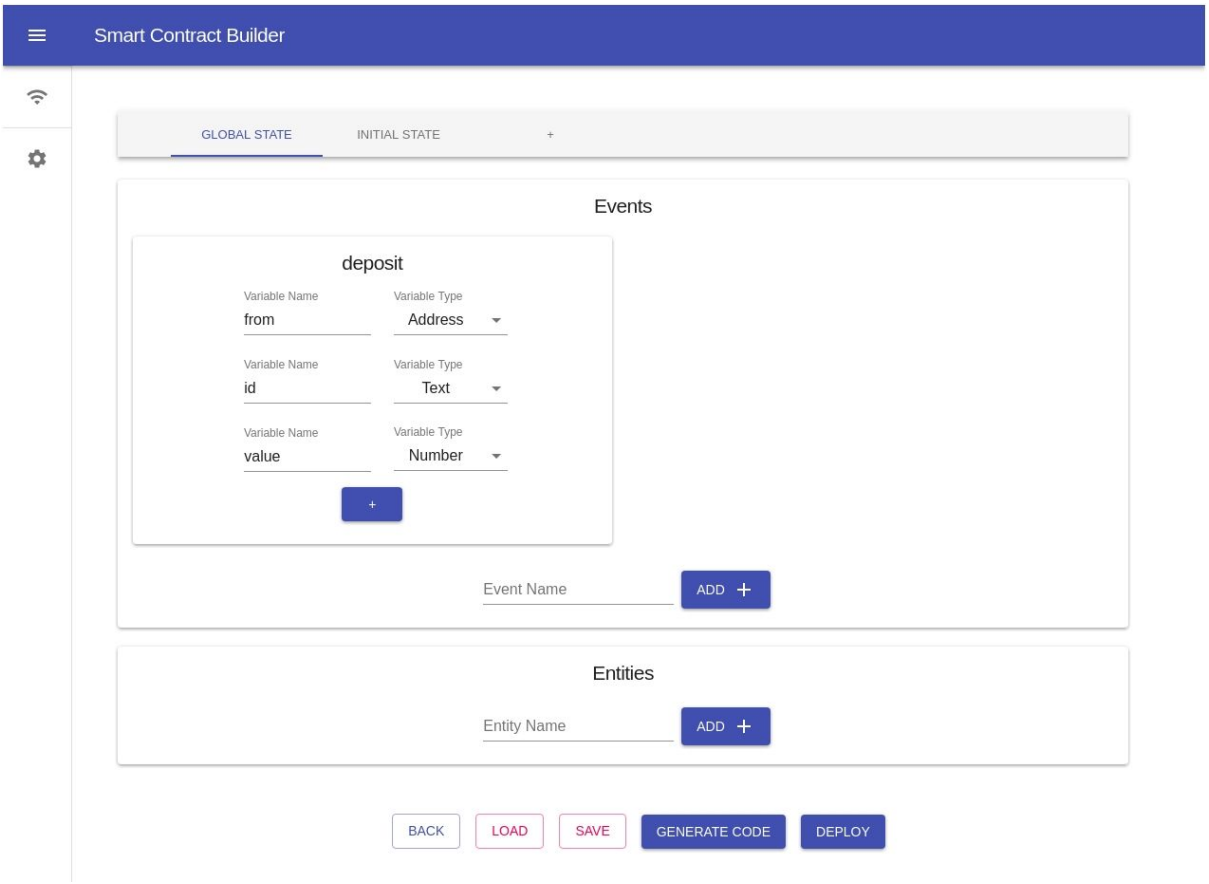


Figure 3.4: Screenshot of an event

3.3.2.2.2 Entities Box

In the Smart Contract Builder, the concept of an entity is equivalent to a struct in Solidity or other languages like C. Entities encapsulate information into an object which allows cleaner and more logical code. Similar to events, entities are declared in the Global State Tab so that they can be used later in the diagrams in the Build Tabs.

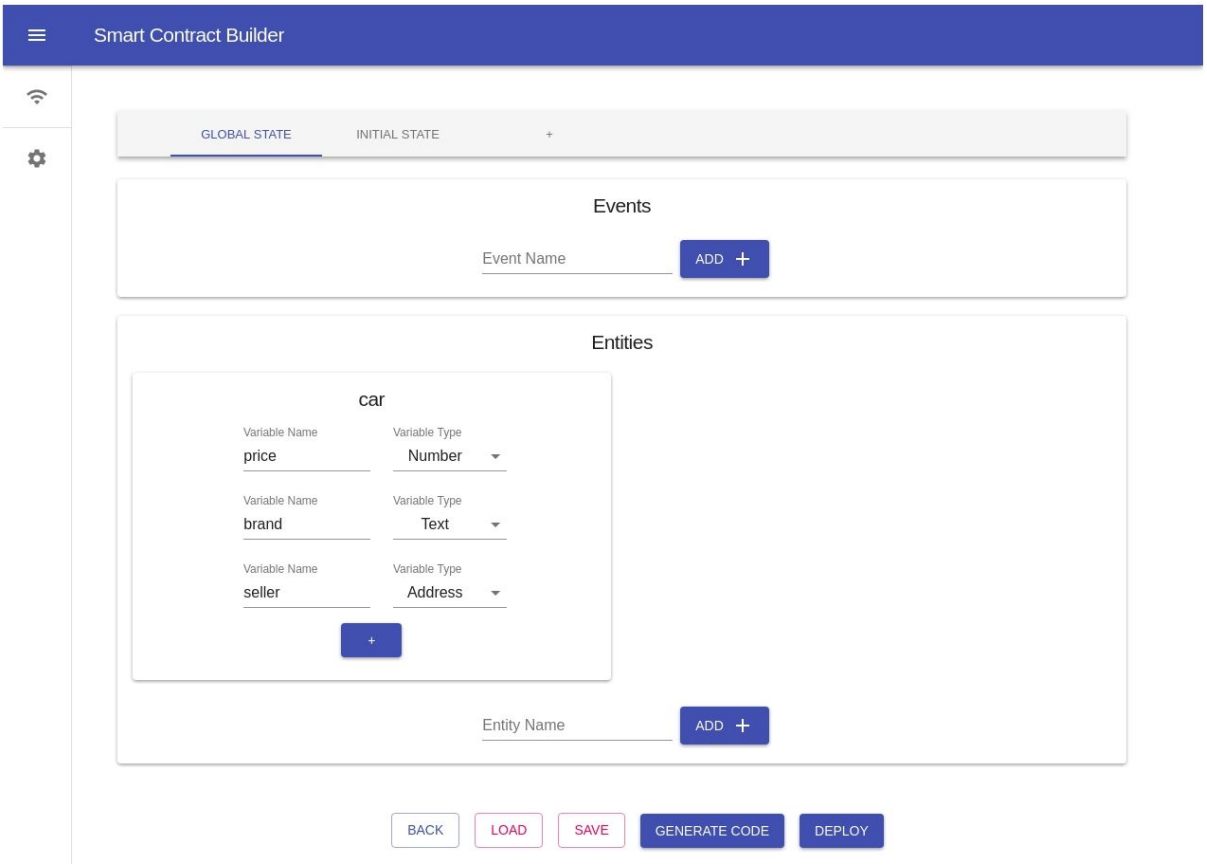


Figure 3.5: Screenshot of an entity

3.3.2.2.3 Constructor Parameters Box

The constructor parameters are obtained from the Initial State Tab, and will need to be filled on the Global State Tab. This gives the values for the smart contract to be initialised if the constructor has any parameters. If the constructor does not have any parameters, the constructor parameters field will be omitted. For example, for the constructor input box in the Initial State Tab in Figure 3.6, the Constructor Parameter box will appear as in Figure 3.7:

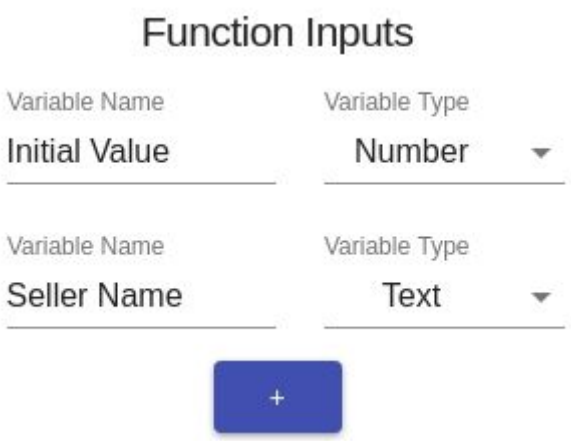


Figure 3.6: Initial State Tab's example inputs

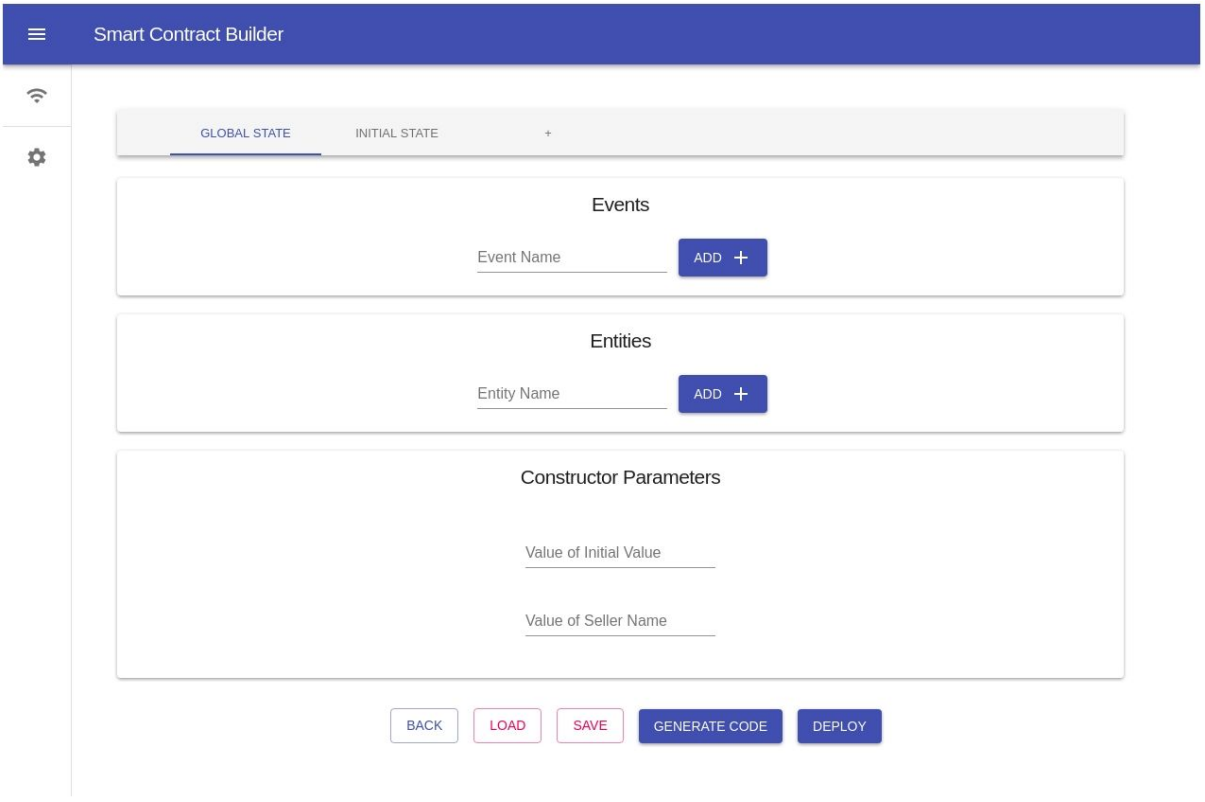


Figure 3.7: Global State Tab's Constructor Parameters Corresponding to Figure 3.6

3.3.2.3 Build Tabs

The Build Tabs represent the functions of the smart contract. Each function corresponds to a single Build Tab, and the function name is the name of the Build Tab. The Initial State Tab represents the constructor function, while additional

functions can be added by clicking on the plus sign and entering a non-duplicate name.

There are 3 boxes in a Build Tab: the function input box, the checking phase and the action phase.

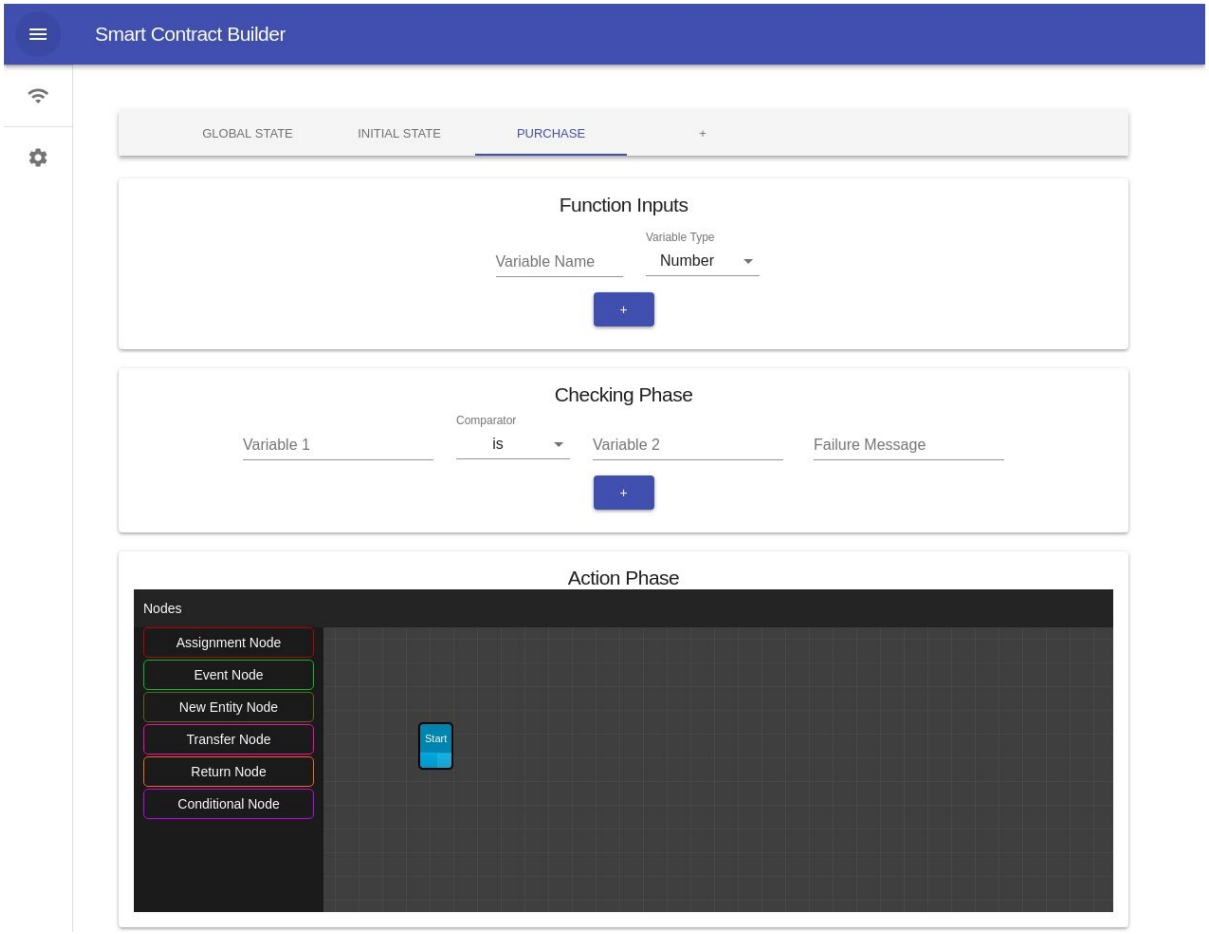


Figure 3.8: Example “Purchase” Build Tab

3.3.2.3.1 Function Input Box

The function input box allows the user to specify function parameters for each function as well as their types. Clicking on the plus button will add a new row for the user to add another function parameter.

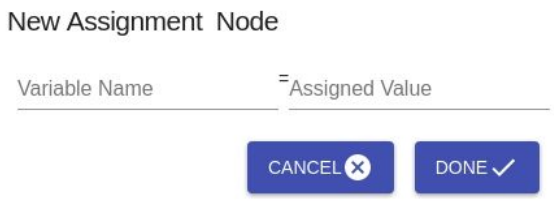
Users will have to give each parameter a name in order to identify it in the checking and action phases, and also the type of the parameter. The Smart Contract Builder requires the user to declare the type of each parameter as it is impossible to infer the type of the function parameters during code generation.

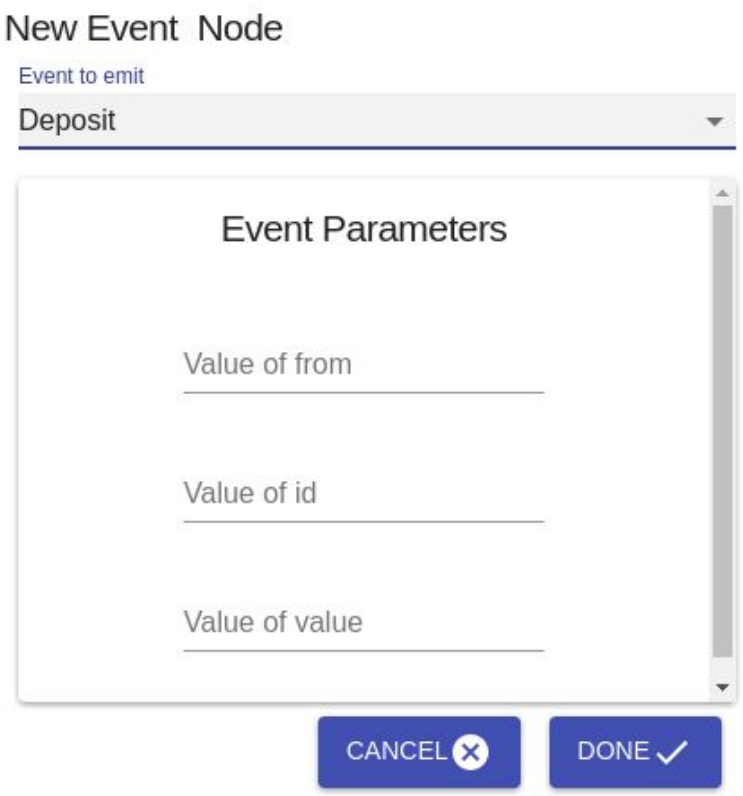
3.3.2.3.2 Checking Phase Box

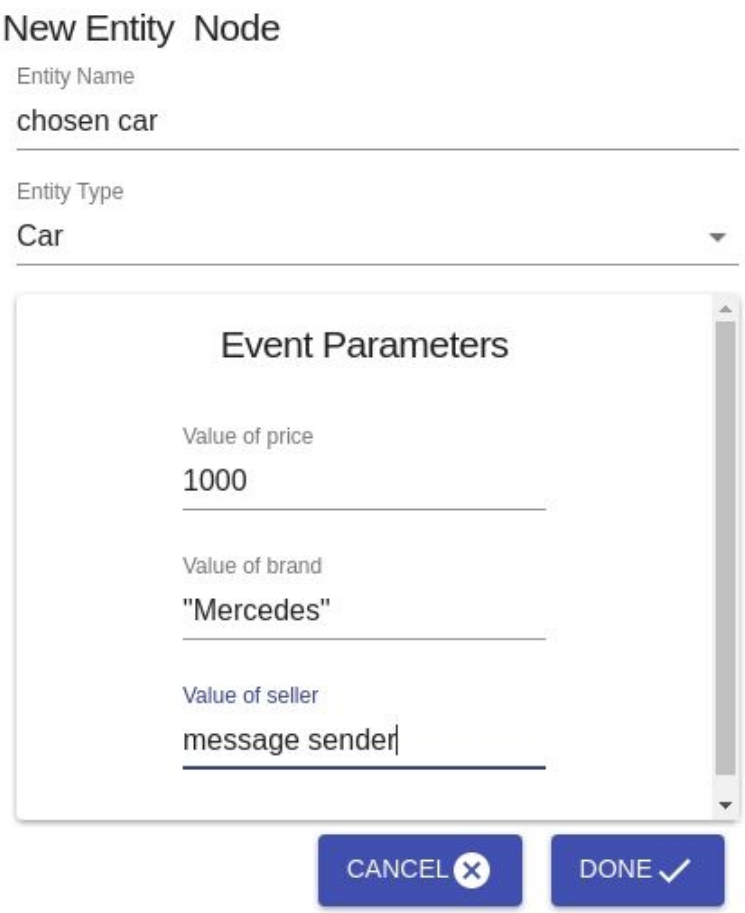
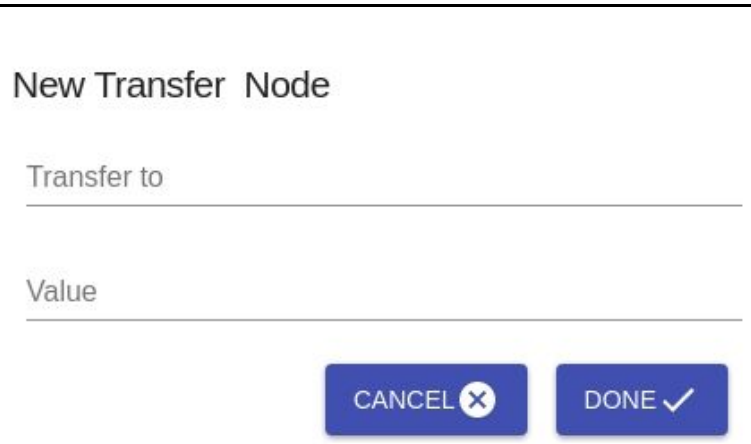
The checking phase ensures the validity of inputs before a function is run. If the user specified conditions are not met, the transaction and blockchain will be reverted to before the function was run. The failure message will be displayed by the smart contract when the condition is not met. Each condition will be converted to a require statement when the code is generated.

3.3.2.3.3 Action Phase Box

The action phase represents the actual logic that will be translated into code, and is visualised as a drag and drop flow diagram. The user will choose a type of node that he wants to add to the diagram from the left panel, and drags and drops it on to the diagram. A modal will be opened to ask the user for more details and once the user fills in the modal and clicks the done button, the node will be added to the diagram. The user will then connect the nodes in the logical order of execution.
The following table shows the modal for each type of node:

Node	Modal
Assignment Node	

Event Node	 New Event Node Event to emit Deposit Event Parameters Value of from Value of id Value of value CANCEL DONE

Entity Node	
Transfer Node	

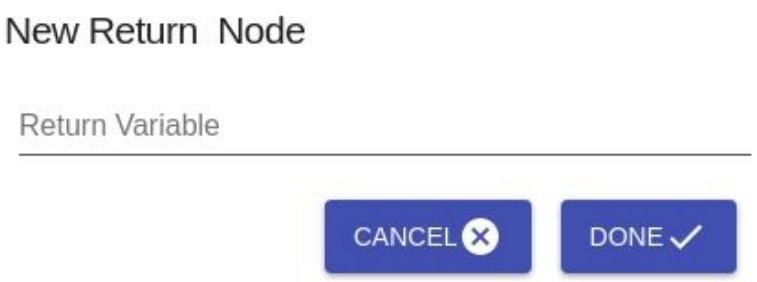
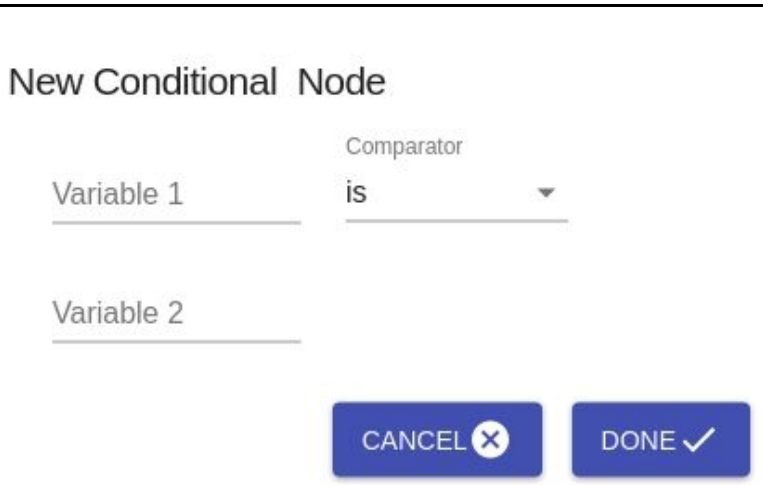
Return Node	
Conditional Node	

Table 3.1: Modal appearance and options for all node types

Note that for the event and new entity type nodes, users will have to fill in different parameters depending on how the event or entity was defined in the Global State Tab. In Table 3.1, the example used for the entity node follows the entity shown in Figure 3.4.

All variable fields are free text. This is to allow the user more freedom in creating variables and not have to worry about declaring them, as the backend logic will handle this (more on the implementation of this in section 3.4). Our initial designs had the user declaring all variables that they wanted to use in the Global State Tab, but we decided to make it more intuitive and abstract the concept of variables from the user as much as possible.

3.3.3 Backend Logic

There are 2 main components responsible for the backend logic: the BuildParser class and the BuildOptions component. There also exists a saving and loading mechanism, allowing users to save their progress and continue from where they left off.

3.3.3.1 BuildParser

The BuildParser is responsible for parsing the diagrams and generating the code for each function. An instance of the BuildParser class is attached to each instance of the Action Phase diagram. A linkUpdated listener is attached to each diagram, and the BuildParser's parse method is called when a link is created between 2 nodes. The BuildParser keeps track of the code generated and the return type, which is needed in the function declaration. The BuildParser parses the diagram in 2 loops. The first loop looks for variables, infers their types and adds their names and types to a variable lookup table. It checks Assignment, New Entity and Transfer nodes in the first step as these nodes provide the most information about variable types. In the second loop, the BuildParser traverses each node recursively from the start node of the diagram, and visits each neighbour. At each node, it parses all variables involved in that node using the parseVariable method and generates the code for that node using the parseNode method. It uses the variable lookup table from the first loop that keeps track of all variables in the application and their types, allowing it to check for typing problems. If the node is a return type node, it will also update the return variable type in the function declaration.
When it encounters a conditional node, in which there are 2 connected neighbours for the true and false conditions, it will traverse each path separately and fill in the if/else conditions. If there is a loop, as shown in Figure 3.8, it will detect a cycle in the diagram and append a while loop to the smart contract code instead of an if statement. Also, if it detects an intersection later in the diagram, it will exit the if/else condition and resume normal single path traversal.

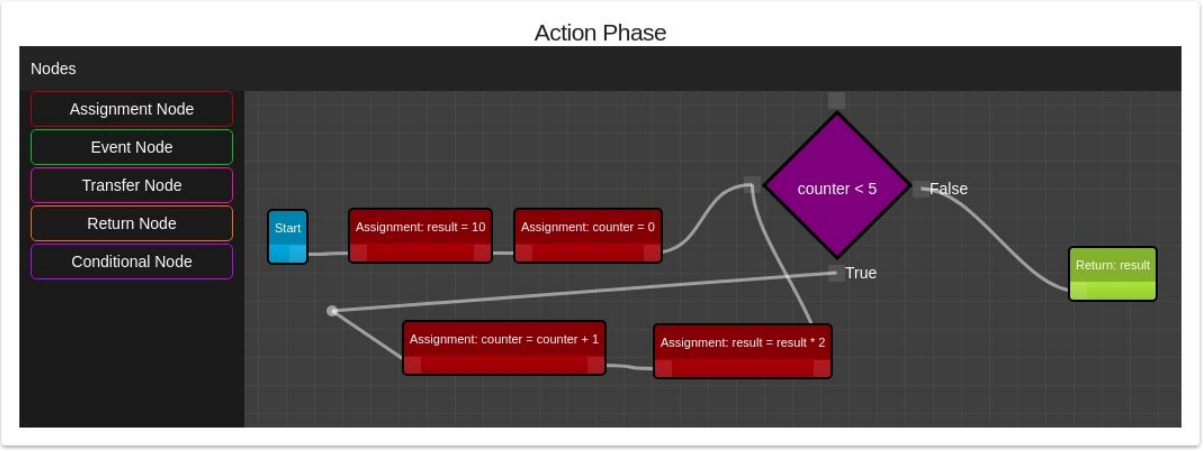


Figure 3.9: Example of while loop detected due to cycle

The initial algorithm used a single iteration to loop through the diagram, but unfortunately this led to many bugs as the algorithm needed more variable typing information about nodes that it had not visited yet. It also attempted to infer variable types and generate code for the same node at the same time, which led to more unexpected errors being thrown. Although the new algorithm is slower due to using 2 loops instead of 1, it is a more reliable parsing algorithm as it splits the two steps of inferring variable types and generating code, giving it some lookahead.
Since the algorithm runs in 2 iterations for parsing variables and generating code and during each iteration it visits every node exactly once, the algorithm has a time complexity of O(2n) = O(n) where n is the number of nodes in the diagram. Thus it runs in linear time to the number of nodes in the diagram that are connected to the start node.

3.3.3.2 BuildOptions

The BuildOptions React component is responsible for generating the code and deploying it to the blockchain. It is triggered when the user clicks on the Build button at the bottom of the Build page. It takes the details and code generated from the Initial State Tab and Build Tabs, and organises it to a syntactically correct Solidity smart contract. It then uses web3 to attempt to deploy this smart contract. If an error is raised, the user will be notified. If deployment is successful, the transaction hash

and contract address of the smart contract will be shown. This transaction hash can be used to check the status of the transaction on the blockchain.

3.3.3.2.1 Code Generation

Each solidity function can be broken down into segments, which correspond to each piece of information input by the user.

By identifying the components of a smart contract, we are able to place the information given by the user at the correct points of the code. This allows us to formulate a general formula for getting a smart contract. Appendix A shows the general anatomy of a Solidity smart contract.

When the generate code button is clicked, the file will be saved to a user-defined Solidity file in the saved_contracts directory. The saving mechanism is described later in Section 3.3.2.2.3.

3.3.3.2.2 Contract Compilation and Deployment

Because Electron works by having a single backend main process and multiple renderer windows, the solc compilation must be done on the backend, as it is an operating system process. By using the ipcRenderer and ipcMain classes, we are able to send a request to the main thread to compile the Solidity code into the machine readable application binary interface (ABI). After compilation, web3 will be used to deploy the contract onto the blockchain.

An example of the message visible on Ganache CLI when a contract is deployed using the Smart Contract Builder is shown in Figure 3.10:

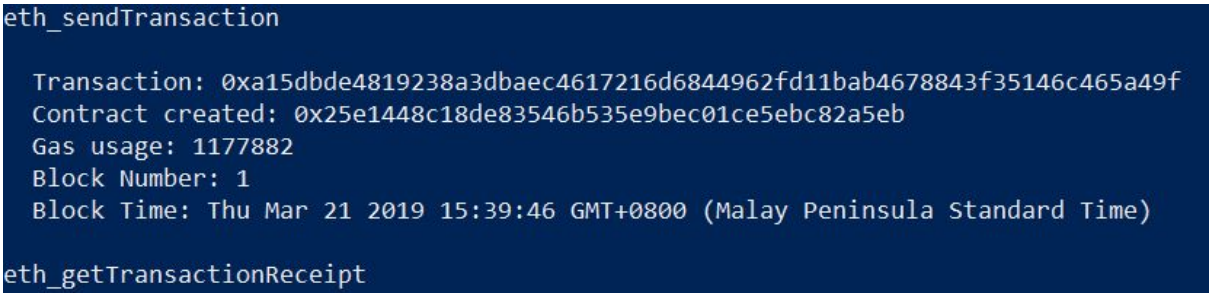


Figure 3.10: Example of Ganache CLI Deployment Message

3.3.3.2.3 Saving and Loading Mechanism

The Smart Contract Builder is able to save the current progress of the user and load it at a later time. This is achieved using Electron's readdir, readFile and writeFile functions in the filesystem module (fs). The files are stored in the saved_data directory. The readdir function reads all json files from the saved_data directory and keeps it in the state. When the save button is clicked, a popover appears prompting the user to input a name for the file. After the user enters a name, the entire state of the Build component, that stores and controls the state of the Initial State Tab and the Build Tabs, will be stringified and dumped into a JSON file with the given filename in the saved_data directory. When the load button is clicked, a popover appears for the user to select which JSON file to load. The JSON file will be read and parsed, and the state of the Build component will be reverted to the contents of the JSON file.

4. Evaluation of Results

4.1 Methodology of evaluation

We identify and use 2 key metrics for evaluating the usefulness of the Smart Contract Builder, flexibility and performance, which inform us on its usability and efficiency respectively.

We use 7 smart contracts that are available as examples on the official Solidity documentations [16] and the official ERC20 token implementation from Open Zeppelin [17] as reference material, so that we can implement them using the Smart Contract Builder and compare them.

To measure the flexibility of the application, we attempt to implement the reference contracts using the Smart Contract Builder. If the reference contract uses Solidity features that the Smart Contract Builder does not implement, we attempt to find a substitute for the feature using other currently implemented features. The flexibility of the application is the complexity of contracts that the Smart Contract Builder is able to fully implement.

To measure the performance and efficiency of the application, we will use the amount of gas consumed in the deployment and execution of the smart contracts. We model the reference contracts using the Smart Contract Builder to achieve the same functionality. We then ran both the original and generated smart contracts through Remix IDE, which is a powerful, open source tool that allows the writing of Solidity contracts straight from the browser. Remix provides the user with gas usage numbers, which we need to make a comparison. For all contracts, the default Javascript VM environment was used.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Flexibility

In this section, we attempt to implement the 8 reference contracts using the Smart Contract Builder.

4.2.1.1 Voting

The voting contract can be fully implemented on the Smart Contract Builder. However, because we did not implement arrays functionality into the Smart Contract Builder, the proposals array in the code, which contains Proposal structs, has to be replaced by a mapping of proposal name to vote counts. This is functionally the same as an array of Proposal objects. We also separated the constructor function so

Figure 4.2: Changed Voting Constructor with addProposal Function

The reasoning behind not implementing arrays into the Smart Contract Builder was that it would require an additional node type. Currently there are already 6 node types, and increasing the number of node types any further may confuse users. In most cases, it is also possible to replace arrays with mappings, as shown above. Therefore we chose to omit arrays from the Smart Contract Builder.
Appendix B show the Build Tabs of the Smart Contract Builder for the Voting contract.

4.2.1.2 Open Auction

We were able to fully implement this contract using the Smart Contract Builder. Appendix C shows the Build Tabs of the Smart Contract Builder for the Open Auction contract.

4.2.1.3 Blind Auction

The Blind Auction contract is an extension of the Open Auction contract. We were not able to implement the Blind Auction contract as it uses hashing and encoding

functions in the reveal function, which we did not implement as we feel that those functions may be too complex for basic users.

4.2.1.4 Safe Remote Purchase

The contract was successfully implemented, but modifiers and enumerators were used in the contract, which we had to replace with require statements and using integers to replace the enumerators. In this case, 0 represented the “Created” enum, 1 represented the “Locked” enum and 2 represented the “Inactive” enum. As a result, the generated code still functions as expected, but is less readable.
Appendix D shows the Build Tabs of the Smart Contract Builder for the Safe Remote Purchase contract.

4.2.1.5 Micropayments Receiver and Payment Channel

We were unable to implement these complex contracts as they heavily use self-destruct, hashing and encoding functions, and even write assembly code directly. The self-destruct operation removes the smart contract code from the blockchain. The remaining Ether stored at that address is sent to a designated target and then the storage and code is removed from the state. It is unlikely that a basic user will require such functionality.

4.2.1.6 Modular Contracts

Libraries are similar to contracts, but their purpose is that they are deployed only once at a specific address and their code is reused. Libraries can be seen as implicit base contracts of the contracts that use them. They will not be explicitly visible in the inheritance hierarchy, but calls to library functions look just like calls to functions of explicit base contracts.
We did not implement libraries for the Smart Contract Builder as it is unlikely that users will require the modularity that it provides.

4.2.1.7 ERC20 Token

We were able to implement this contract. We had to replace the function calls to the internal functions directly with the code of the internal function as the Smart Contract Builder does not support internal function calling.
Appendix E shows the Build Tabs of the Smart Contract Builder for the ERC20 Token.

4.2.2 Performance

The following 4 sections, from 4.2.2.1 and 4.2.2.4, cover the results for Open Auction, Safe Remote Purchase, Voting and ERC20 Token respectively.
Deposit costs are based on the cost of sending data to the blockchain. There are 4 items which make up the full transaction cost:

- the base cost of a transaction (21000 gas)
- the cost of a contract deployment (32000 gas)
- the cost for every zero byte of data or code for a transaction.
- the cost of every non-zero byte of data or code for a transaction.

Execution costs are based on the cost of computational operations which are executed as a result of the transaction.
Unfortunately, Remix IDE's static analysis tool is unable to obtain the gas usage for some functions because the function modifies large areas of storage, and so it returns an infinite or undefined value for gas usage.

4.2.2.1 Results for Open Auction Smart Contract

The general idea of the Open Auction contract is that everyone can send their bids during a bidding period. The bids already include sending money / ether in order to bind the bidders to their bid. If the highest bid is raised, the previously highest bidder gets their money back.
The results are as follows:

	Open Auction from Documentations	Smart Contract Builder	Performance Difference
Deposit cost	400000 gas	422800 gas	-5.7%
Constructor cost	440866 gas	463667 gas	-5.17%
Bid cost	63208 gas	63543 gas	-0.53%
Withdraw cost	infinite	infinite	-
Auction ended cost	infinite	infinite	-

Table 4.1: Comparison of performance with reference contract for Open Auction

The code generated for Open Auction by the Smart Contract Builder can be found in Appendix F.

4.2.2.2 Results for Safe Remote Purchase Contract

The Safe Remote Purchase contract allows 2 parties, a buyer and a seller to transact without the risk of fraud. The money from the buyer will be released to the seller only when the buyer confirms that he has received the item.
The results are as follows:

	Safe Remote Contract From Documentations	Smart Contract Builder	Performance Difference
Deposit cost	437000 gas	425000 gas	+2.82%
Constructor cost	477996 gas	465813 gas	+2.61%
Abort cost	infinite	infinite	-
Confirm purchase cost	42184 gas	42036 gas	+0.35%
Confirm received	infinite	infinite	-

cost			

Table 4.2: Comparison of performance with reference contract for Safe Remote Purchase

The code generated for Safe Remote Purchase using the Smart Contract Builder can be found in Appendix G.

4.2.2.3 Results for Voting Smart Contract

The Voting smart contract allows users to vote for proposals that have been submitted by a chairperson. It is significantly more complex than the Open Auction contract, and showcases Solidity's and the Smart Contract Builder's capabilities to a greater extent.

The results are as follows:

	Voting from Documentations	Smart Contract Builder	Performance Difference
Deposit cost	446400 gas	540600 gas	-21.1%
Constructor cost	487492 gas	709092 gas	-45.5%
Add proposal cost	infinite	infinite	-
Give right to vote cost	infinite	infinite	-
Vote cost	102527 gas	184327 gas	-79.8%
Winning proposal cost	418 gas	394 gas	+6.1%

Table 4.3: Comparison of performance with reference contract for Voting

The code generated for Voting using the Smart Contract Builder can be found in Appendix H.

4.2.2.4 Results for ERC20 Token

This contract implements the basic functionality of all ERC20 tokens.

The results are as follows:

	ERC20 Token	Smart Contract Builder	Performance Difference
Deposit cost	516000 gas	845600 gas	-63.88%
Constructor cost	516525 gas	846459 gas	-63.88%
Transfer cost	42910 gas	undefined	-
Approve cost	22299 gas	undefined	-
Transfer from cost	65277 gas	undefined	-
Increase allowance cost	22750 gas	undefined	-
Decrease allowance cost	22705 gas	undefined	-

The code generated for ERC20 Token using the Smart Contract Builder can be found in Appendix I.

4.3 Findings

The Smart Contract Builder is able to implement the simple Solidity smart contracts and workarounds may have to be used to implement certain features for more complex contracts. The Smart Contract Builder is unable to implement highly complex smart contracts as advanced Solidity features such as hashing, encoding and assembly are not implemented in the Smart Contract Builder, but this is expected as advanced blockchain users are not in our targeted audience. Our target audience consisting of developers new to blockchain or non-technical users are unlikely to require these advanced features.

For the Open Auction contract, the deposit costs and execution costs have a less than 6% drop in performance, as shown in Table 4.1. For the Safe Remote Purchase contract, the generated code even slightly outperforms the reference contract because it does not use the modifier and enum code abstractions. The performance for these small, simple contracts does not deviate significantly from the reference contracts.

However, the ERC20 and Voting contracts are far more complex and with more logical branches and constructs. As a result, the deviation in performance is 79.8% for the Voting contract's vote function because of loop and mapping usage. The cost difference for the constructor function of the ERC20 token, 63.88%, is very significant as well, likely because of the heavy use of nested mapping structures. This shows that the code generated by the Smart Contract Builder does not scale well to complex contracts, which limits its usability for industrial and professional use cases. The Smart Contract Builder performs almost optimally for smaller contracts, but is unable to handle complexity well. There is significant room for improvements through enhancement of the parsing algorithm. Users should use the Smart Contract Builder for learning purposes or for creating smaller contracts only. For larger contracts, they may use the Smart Contract Builder to create the skeleton for their smart contract code, but it is not recommended to use it directly in production due to large drops in performance.

5. Conclusions

In this project, the goal was to create a simple, user-friendly application that allowed both developers and non-developers to create smart contracts and deploy them easily. The main focus was on creating a user interface that was clean and simple, while the backend logic would have to be more complex in order to attempt to infer what the user wants to do, such as the types of their variables and the flow of their diagrams.

From the results, we can tell that the Smart Contract Builder is able to implement simple contracts and most of the functionality in advanced contracts, but it is unable to implement highly complex contracts. In terms of performance, the Smart Contract Builder is able to generate a decent performing smart contract for small contracts, but is unable to produce a well performing smart contract for a larger contract. More work will have to be done on the algorithms used to generate the smart contract from the diagrams before it is ready for commercial or industrial use. Furthermore, the Smart Contract Builder will have to ensure the security and safety of its generated code for usage in a production environment.

Nevertheless, the Smart Contract Builder is not focused on achieving optimal performance, but to simplify and encourage development on the blockchain. Developers may use the Smart Contract Builder to generate the skeleton of a smart contract, then further refine it and optimise it manually. Users who are interested in blockchain but do not have the technical know-how can use the Smart Contract Builder as a first step to learning how smart contracts work in general.

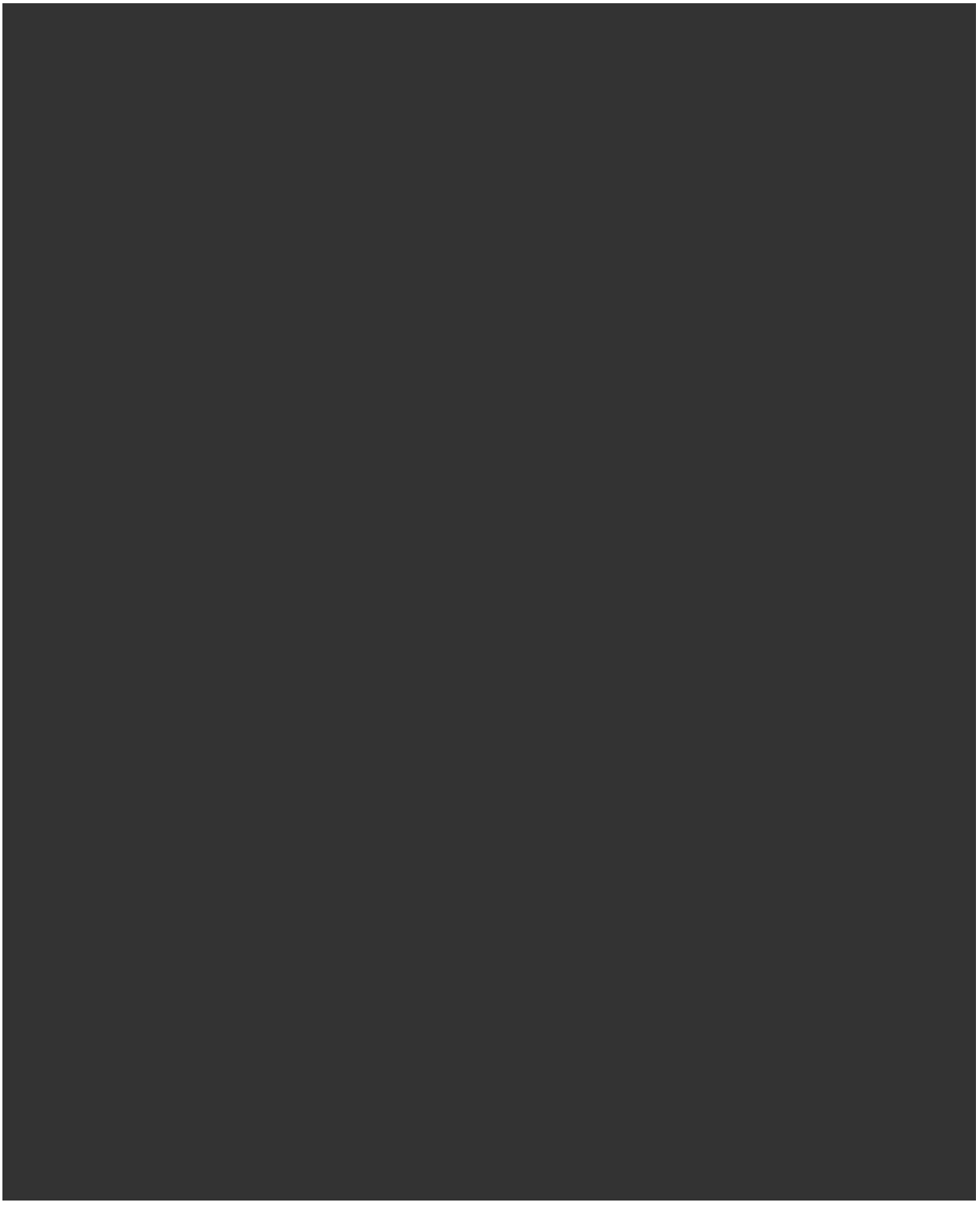
6. Recommendations

There is still much room for improvement in terms of usability, such as further abstracting the code layer from the user, which can be done by introducing an even greater amount of natural language processing so that the user can describe what the smart contract should do instead of its low level logic. The diagrams can be generated from their descriptions, which they may further refine manually. Furthermore, with the pace of development for blockchains and Ethereum, it is likely that due to rapid version changes, the application may become outdated when new updates for Solidity are introduced. Constant development is required to keep the application up to date with Solidity standards. It may even be possible that Solidity becomes obsolete as the Ethereum network may decide to move to Vyper, a newer smart contract language with a focus on readability. [18] Future work should be done to ensure that the application keeps up with ongoing developments. Compatibility with other smart contract languages like Vyper can be introduced to allow greater flexibility and future proofing. In addition, compatibility with permissioned Blockchain networks like Hyperledger Fabric can also be introduced so that a larger corporate audience can be reached.

7. End Section

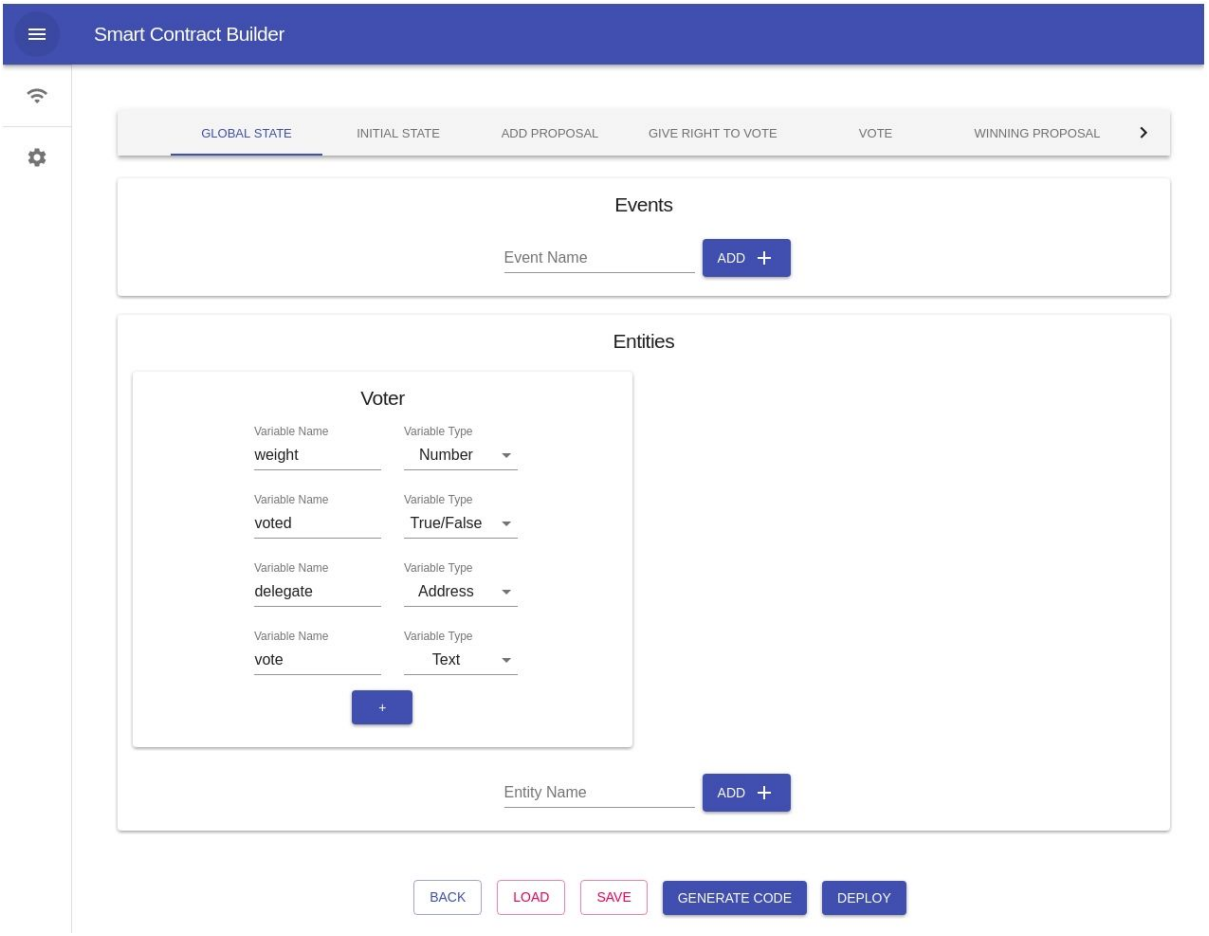
7.1 Appendices

Appendix A: Structure of a Solidity Smart Contract

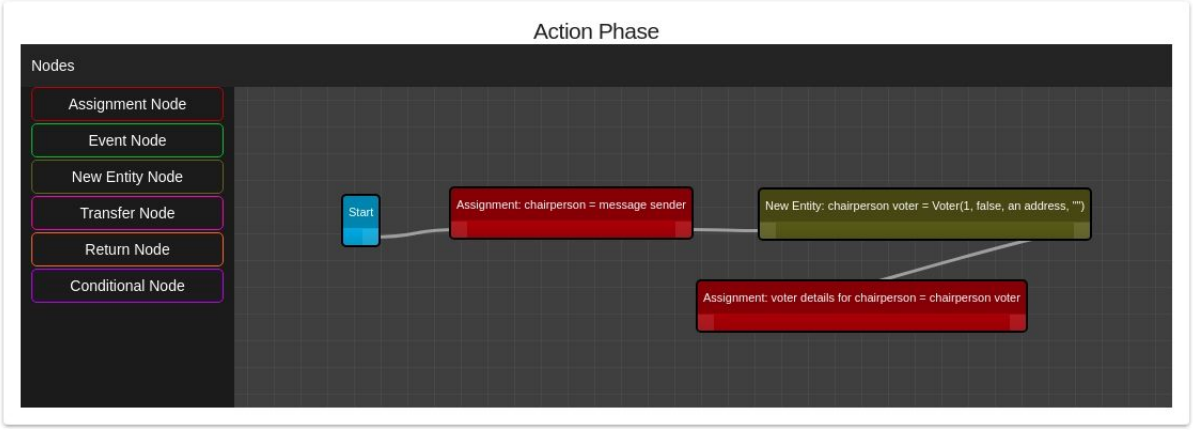


Appendix B: Voting Build Tabs

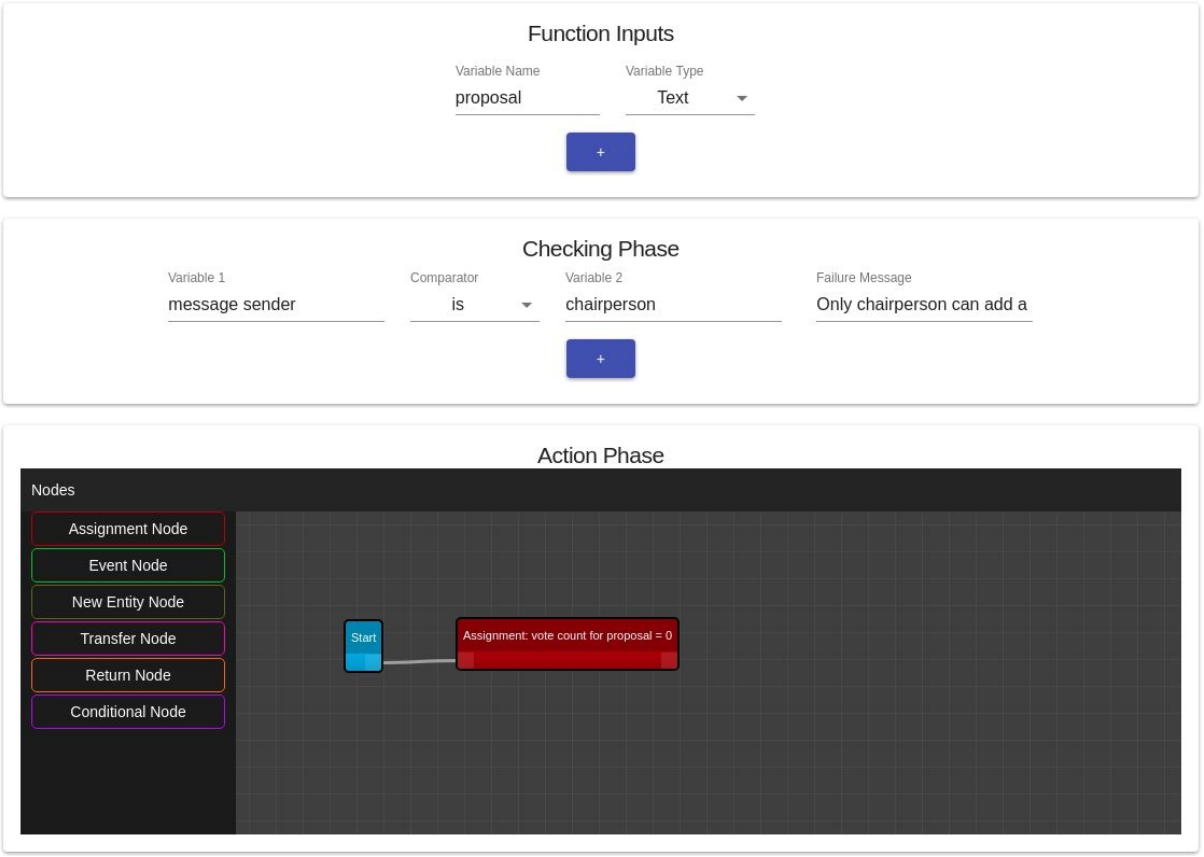
Global State Tab



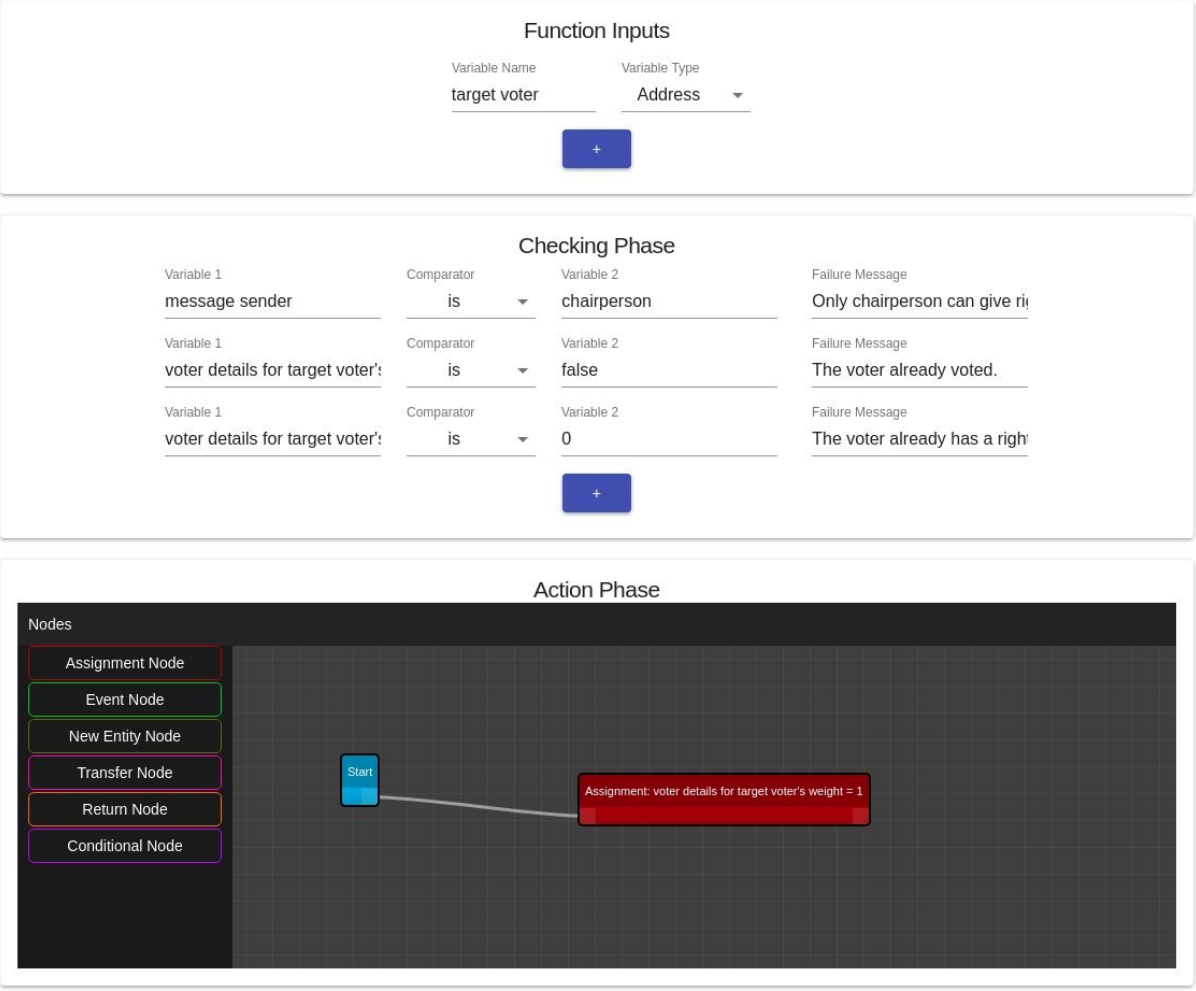
Constructor Function



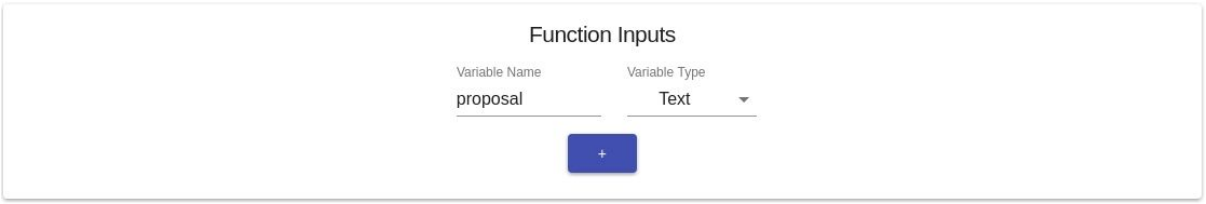
Add Proposal Function

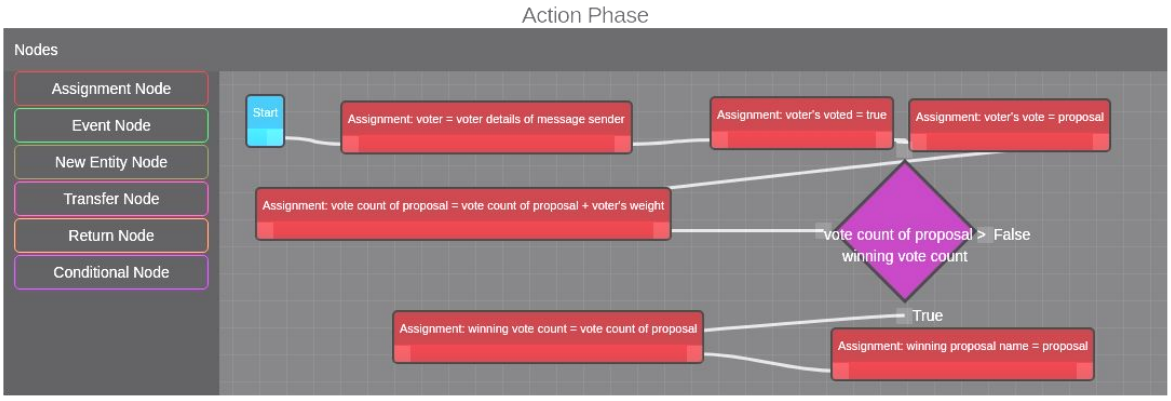


Give Right To Vote Function

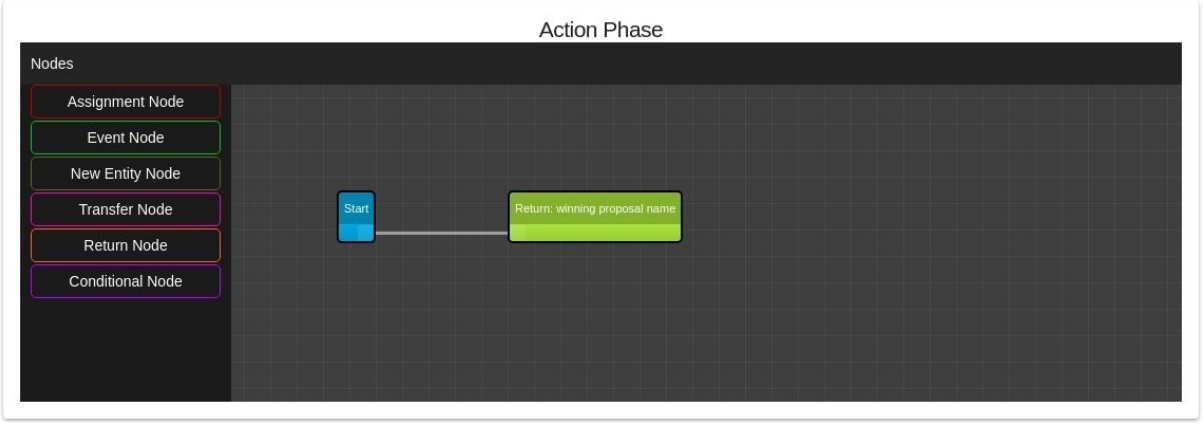


Vote Function



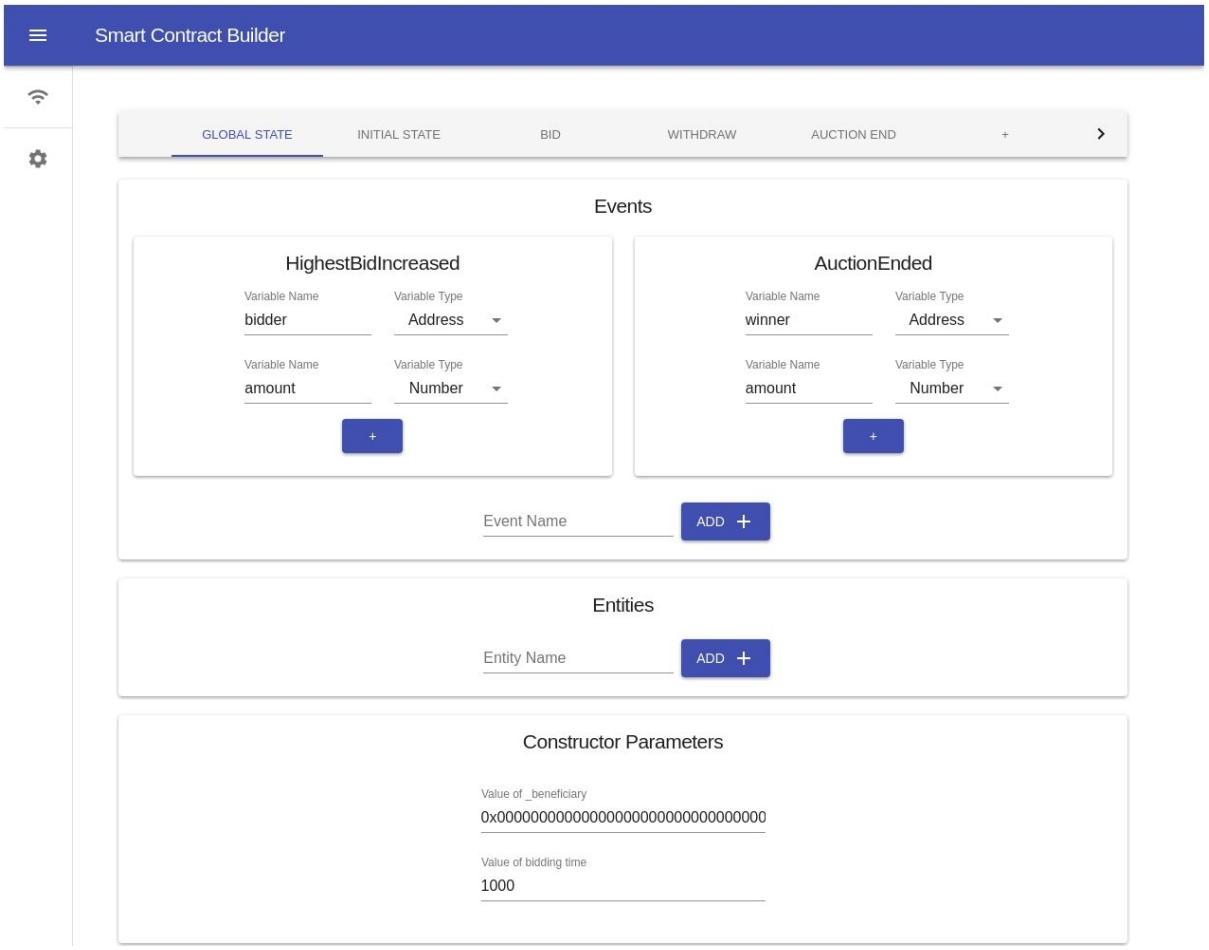


Winning Proposal Function

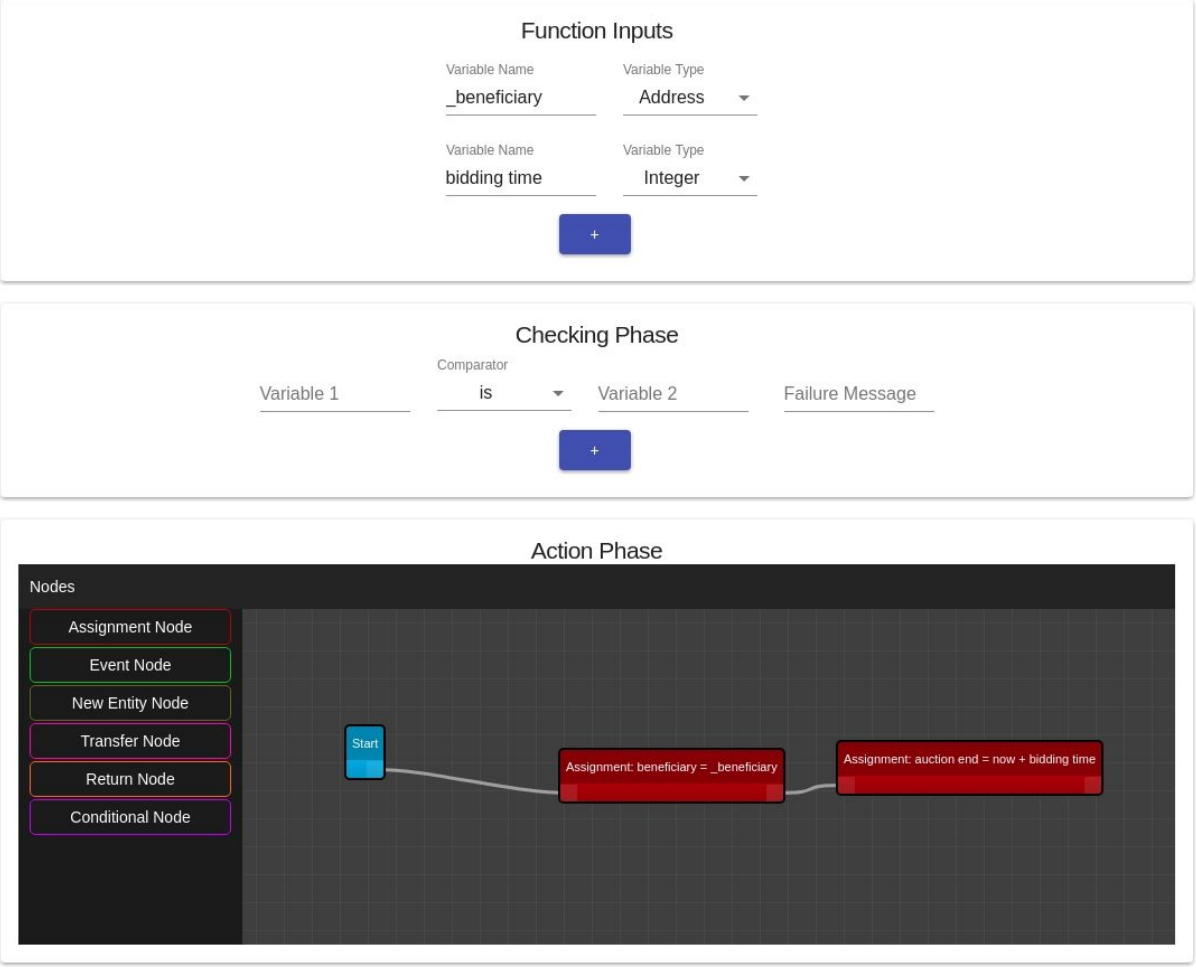


Appendix C: Open Auction Build Tabs

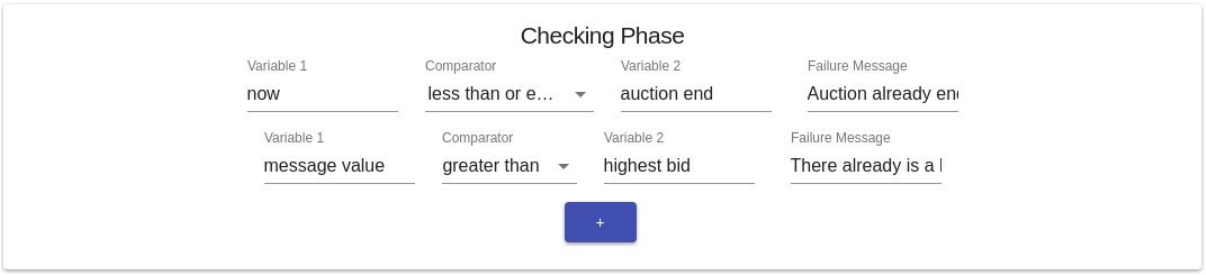
Global State Tab

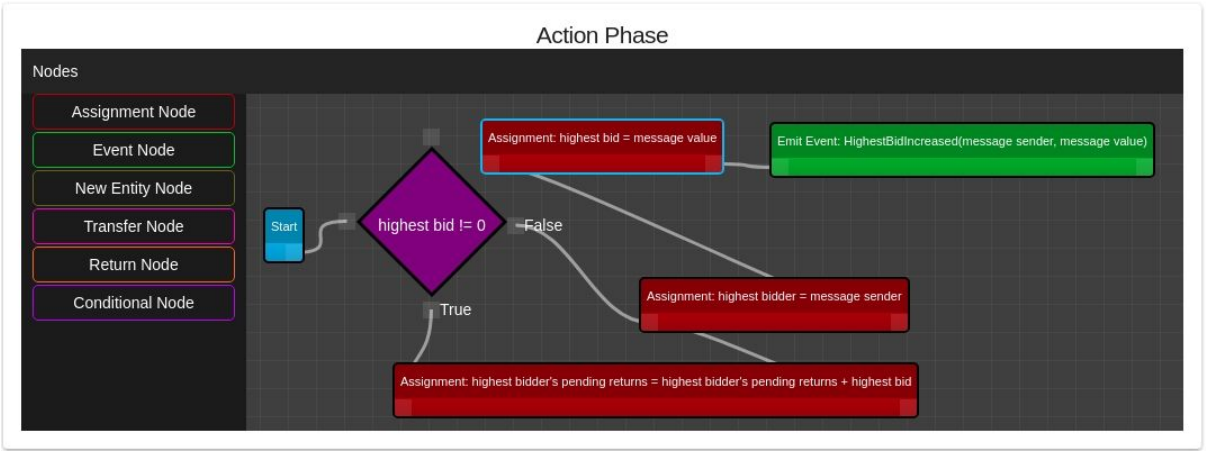


Constructor Function

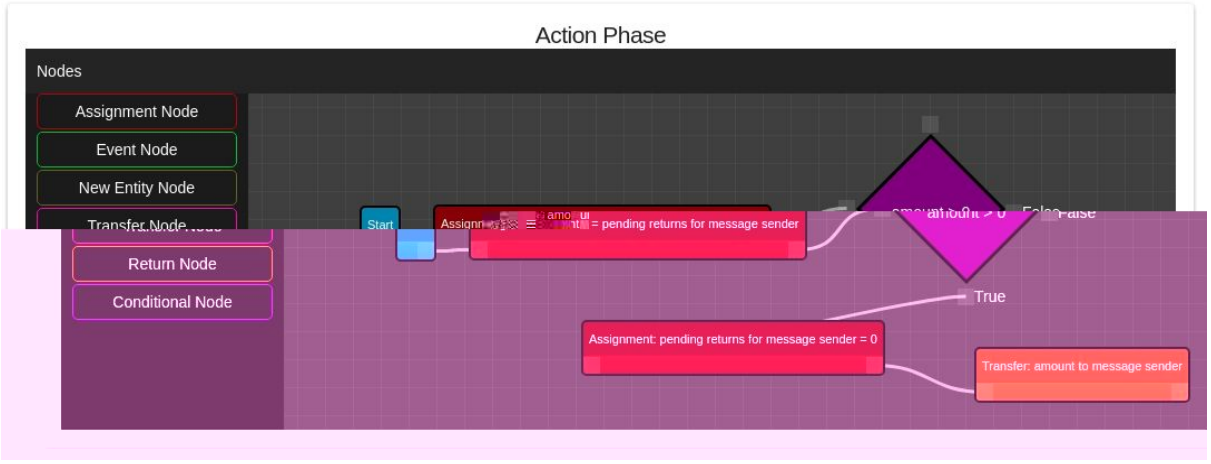


Bid Function

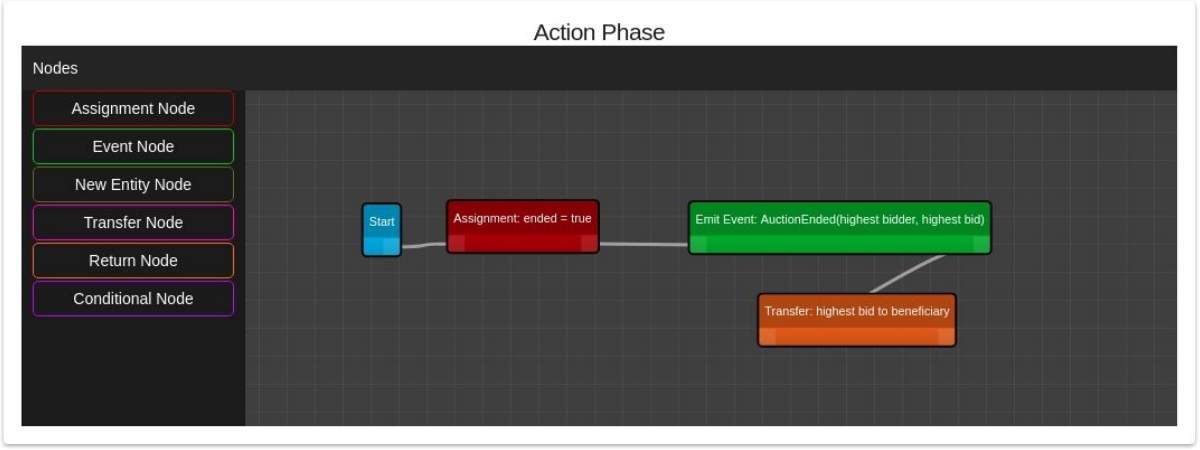




Withdraw Function

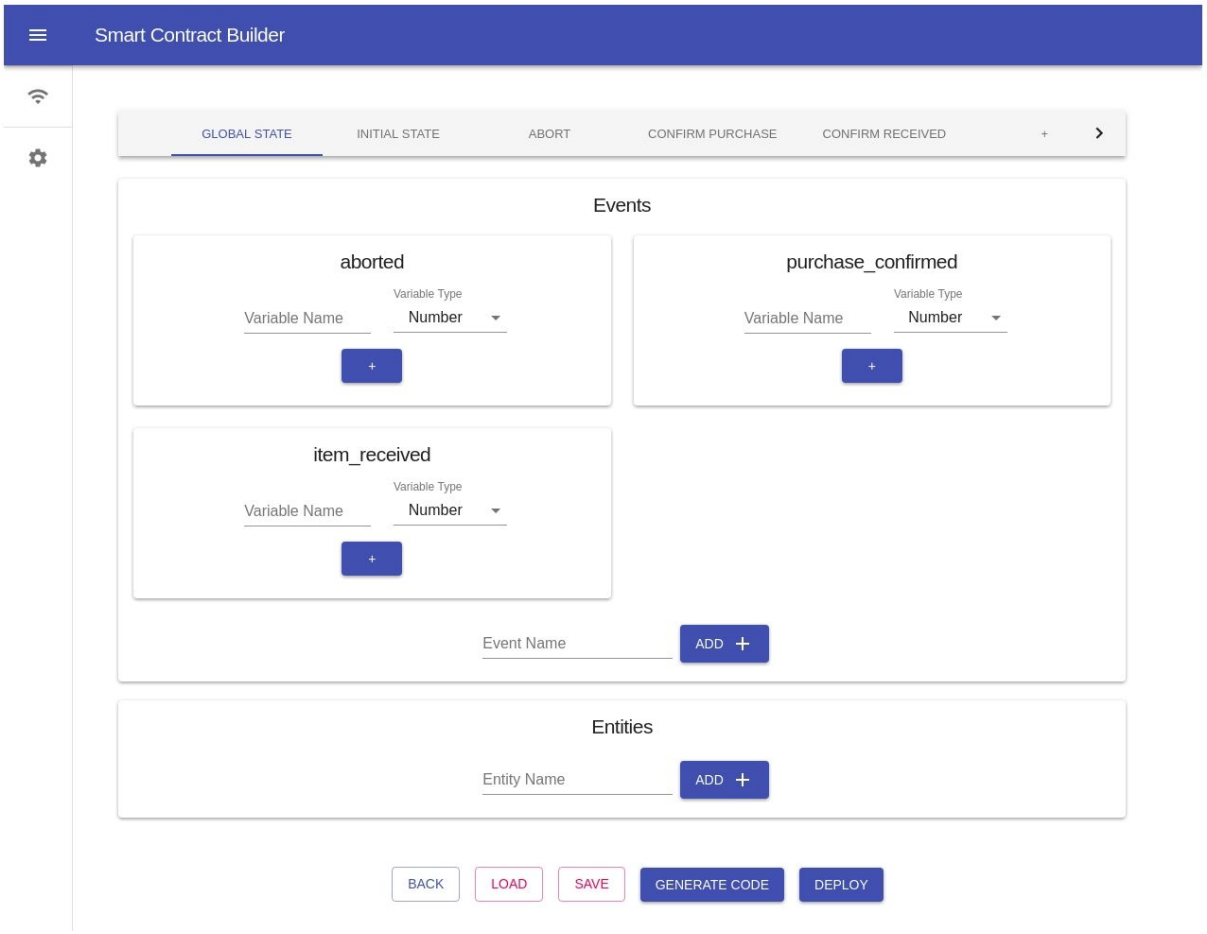


Auction End Function

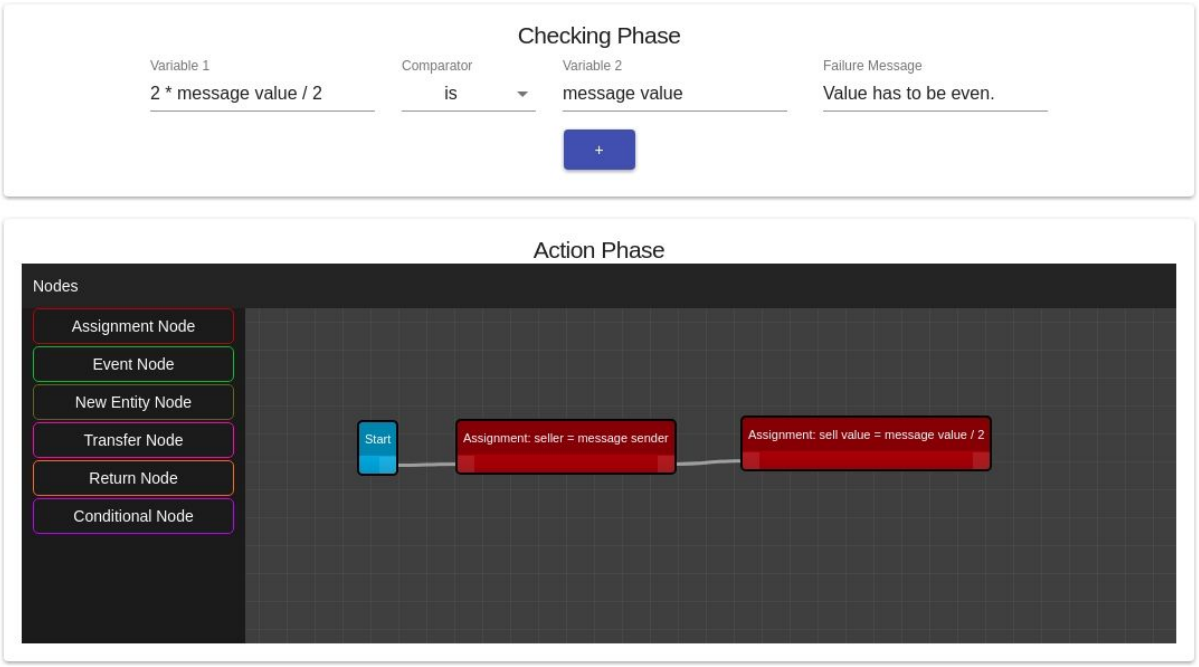


Appendix D: Safe Remote Purchase

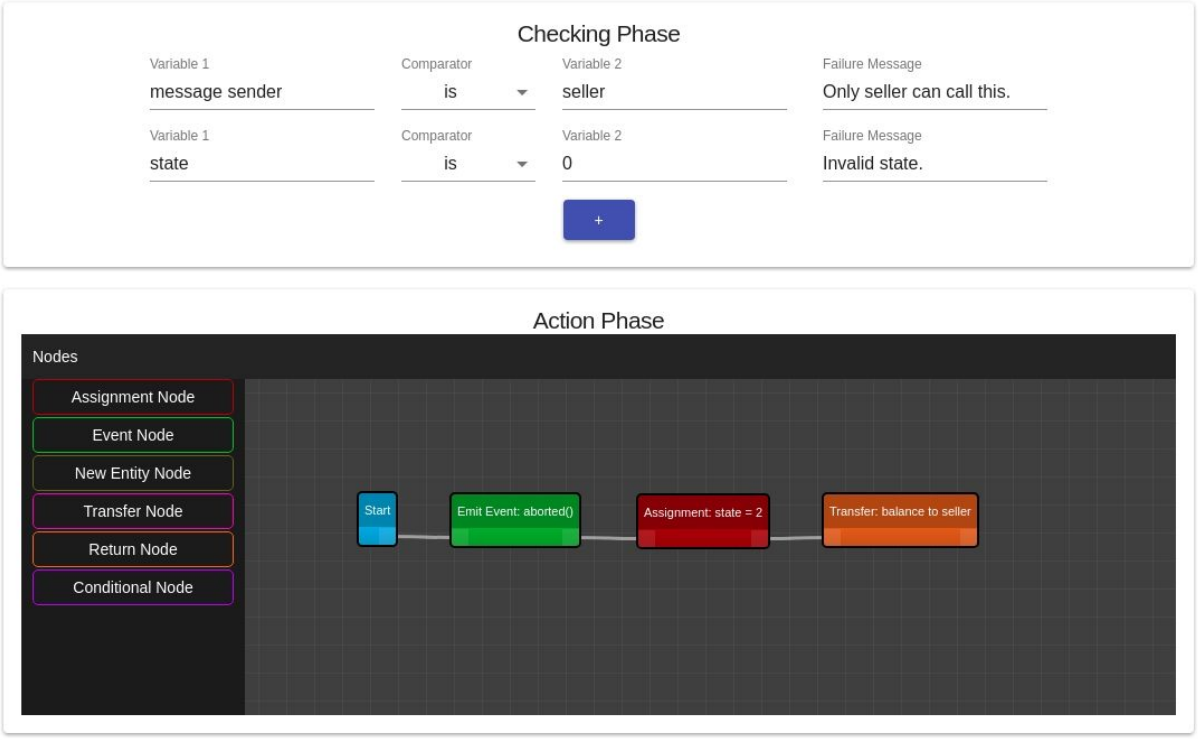
Global State Tab



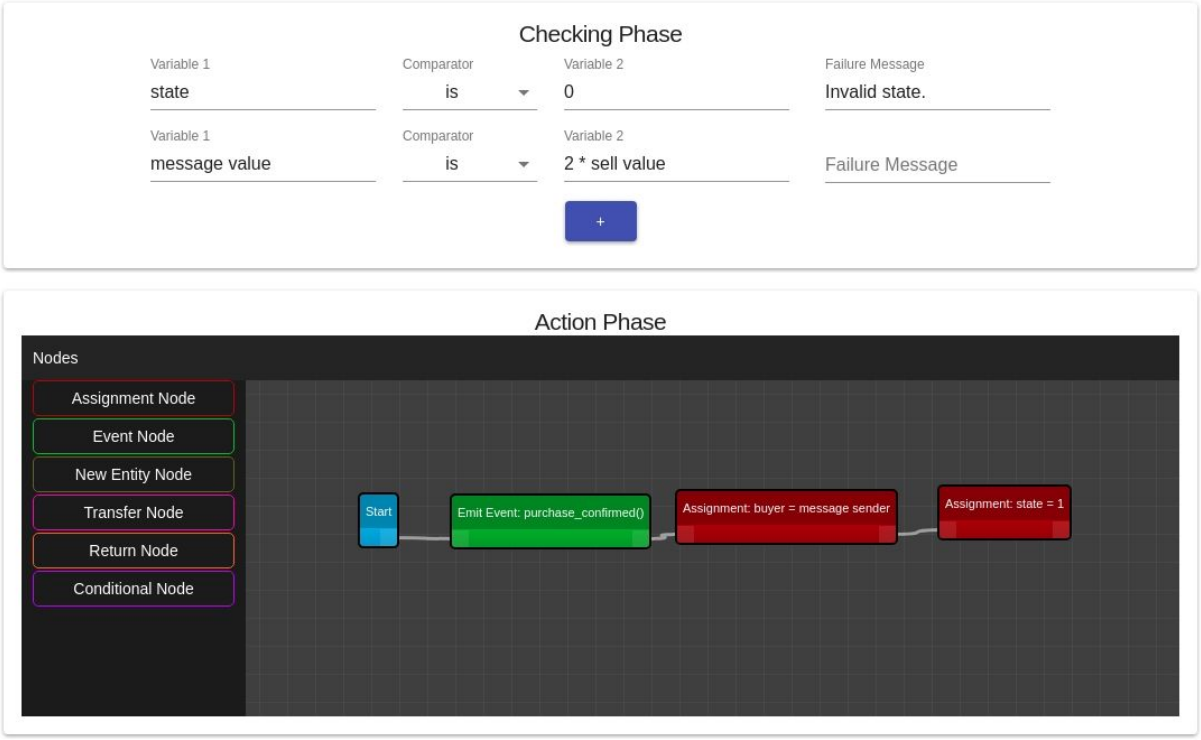
Constructor Function



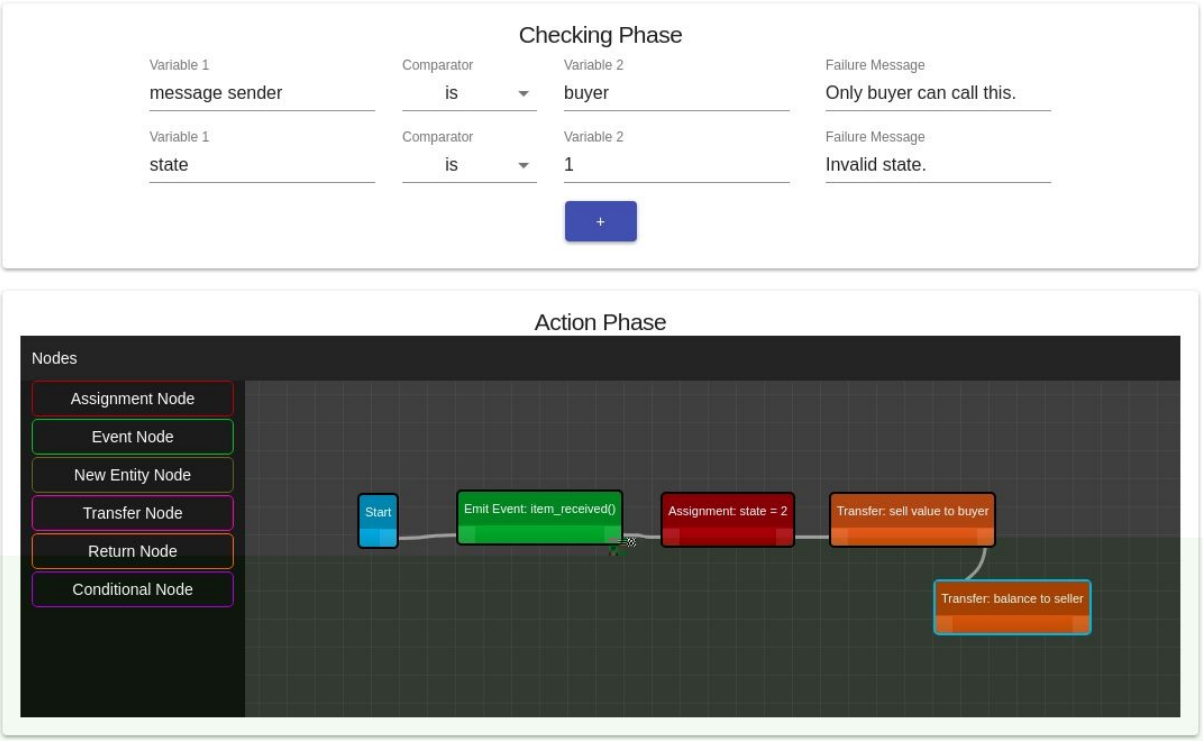
Abort Function



Confirm Purchase Function

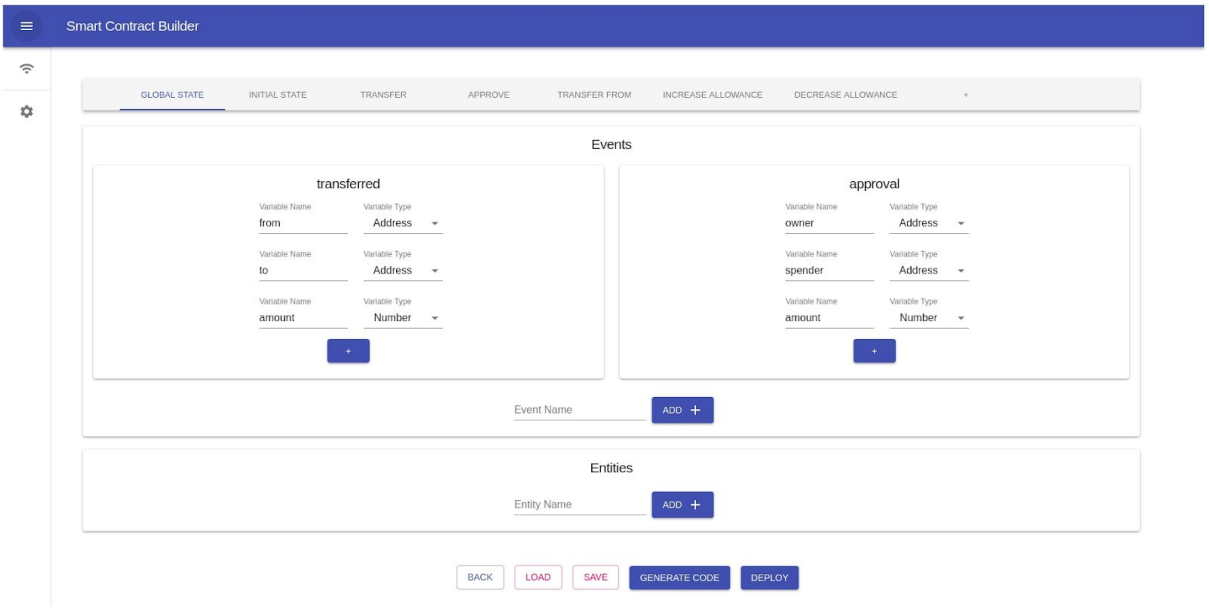


Confirm Received Function

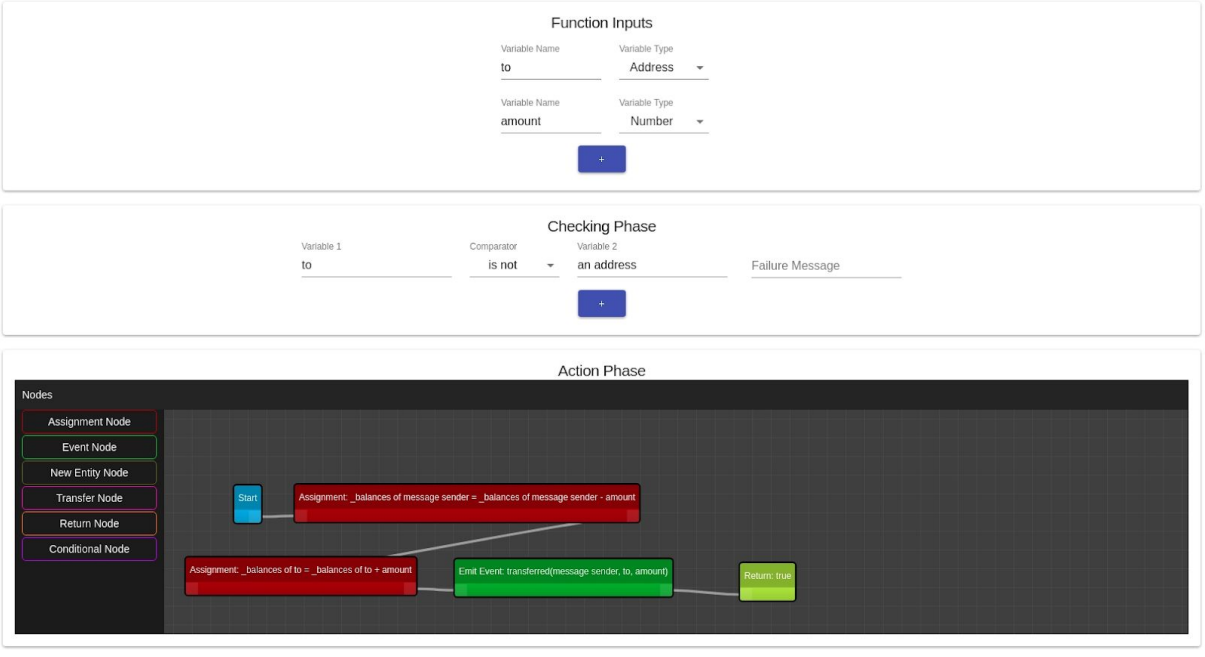


Appendix E: ERC20 Token

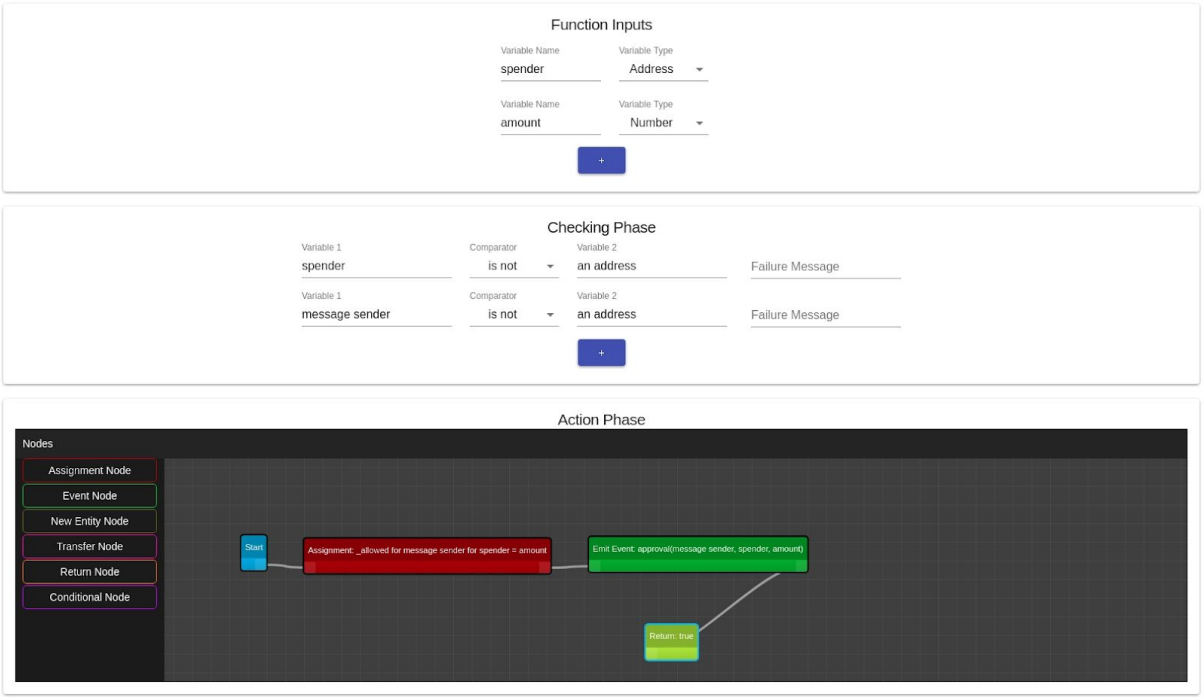
Global State Tab for ERC20



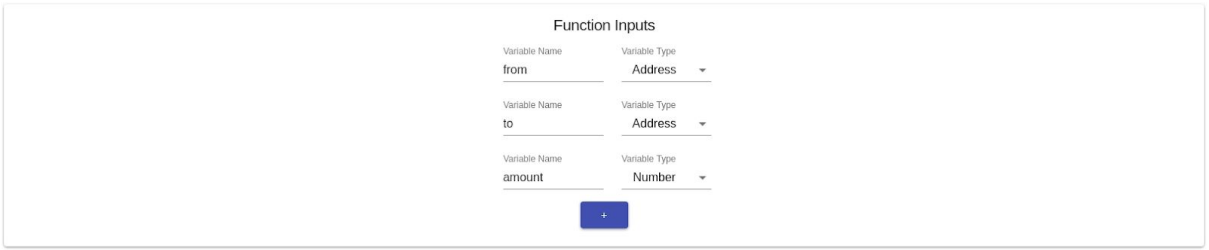
Transfer Function

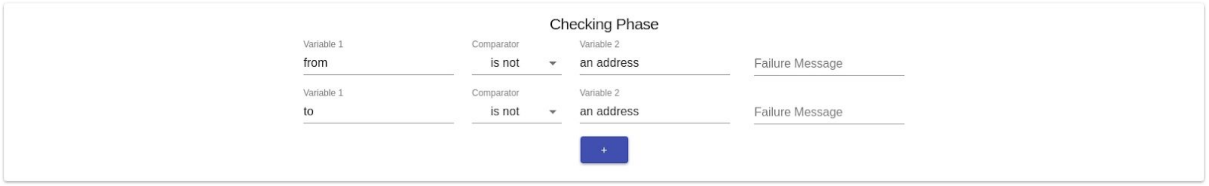


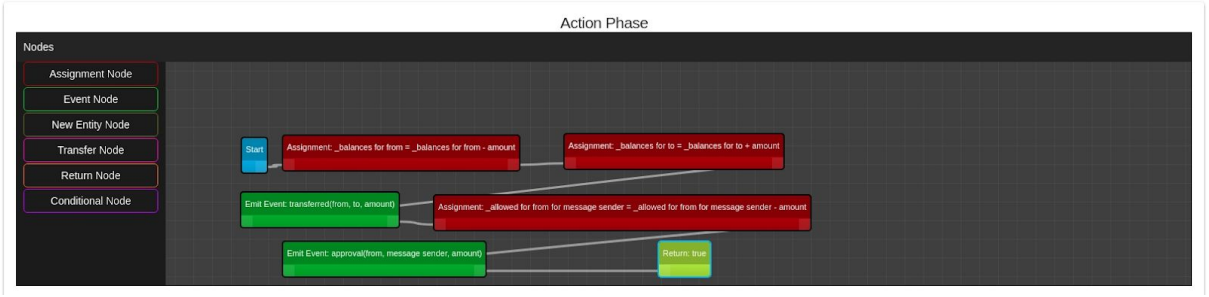
Approve Function



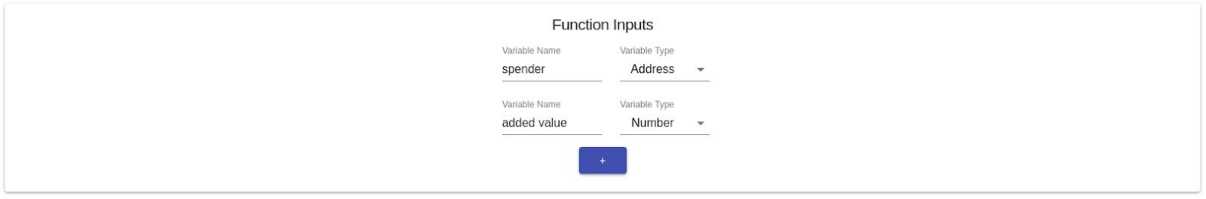
Transfer From Function

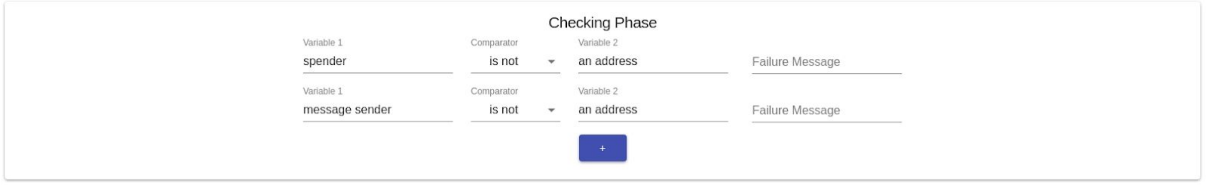


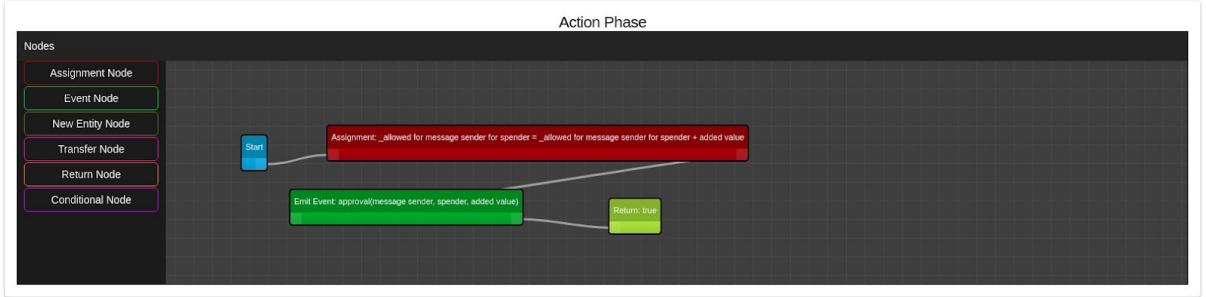




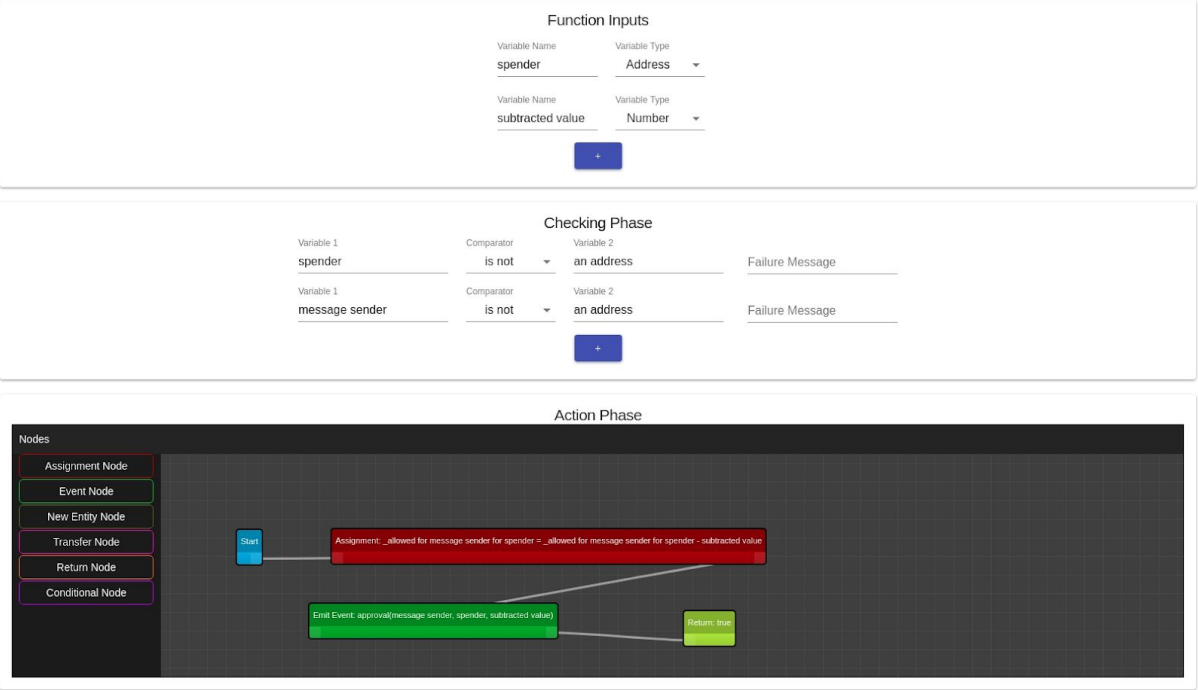
Increase Allowance Function



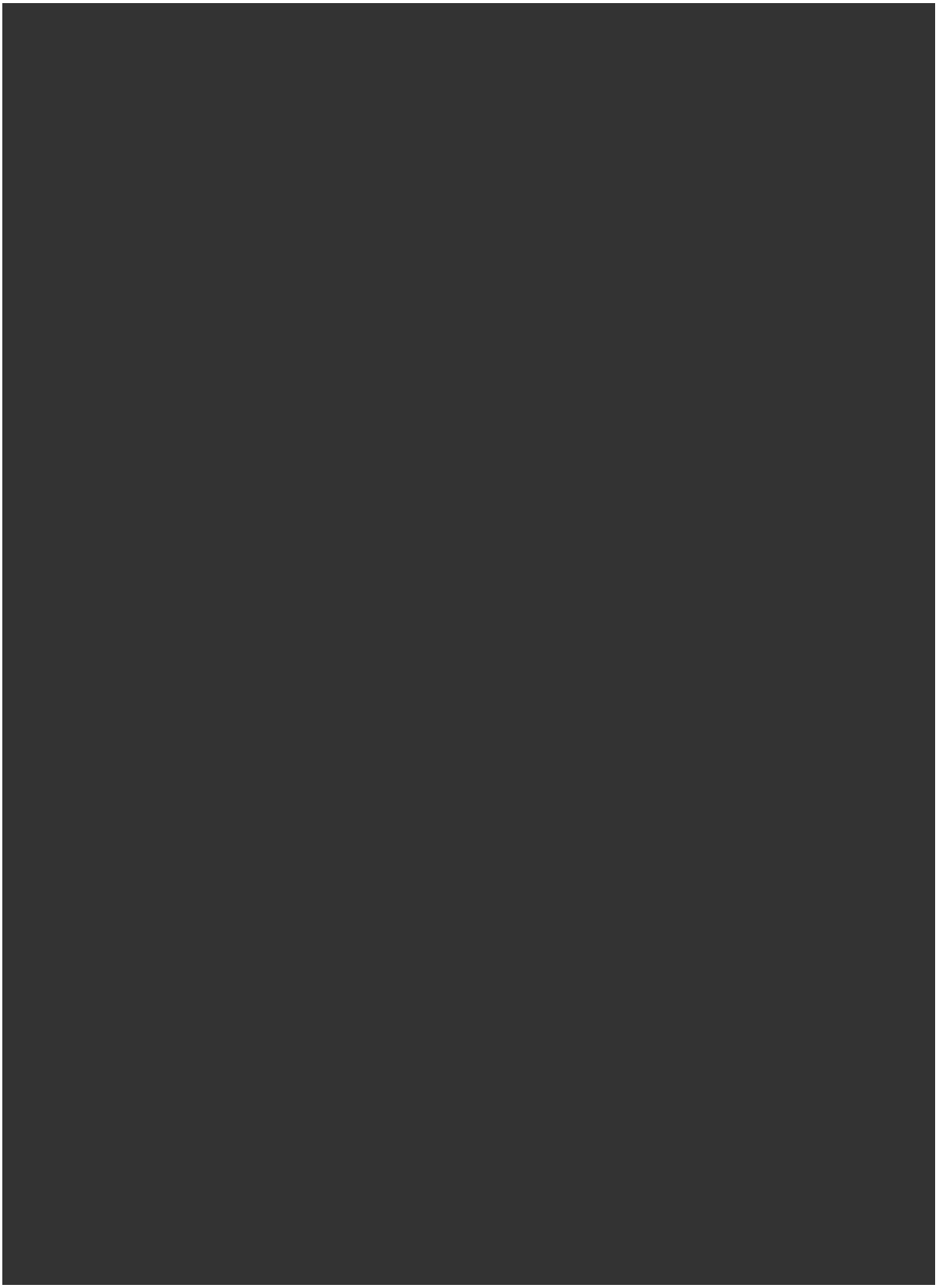




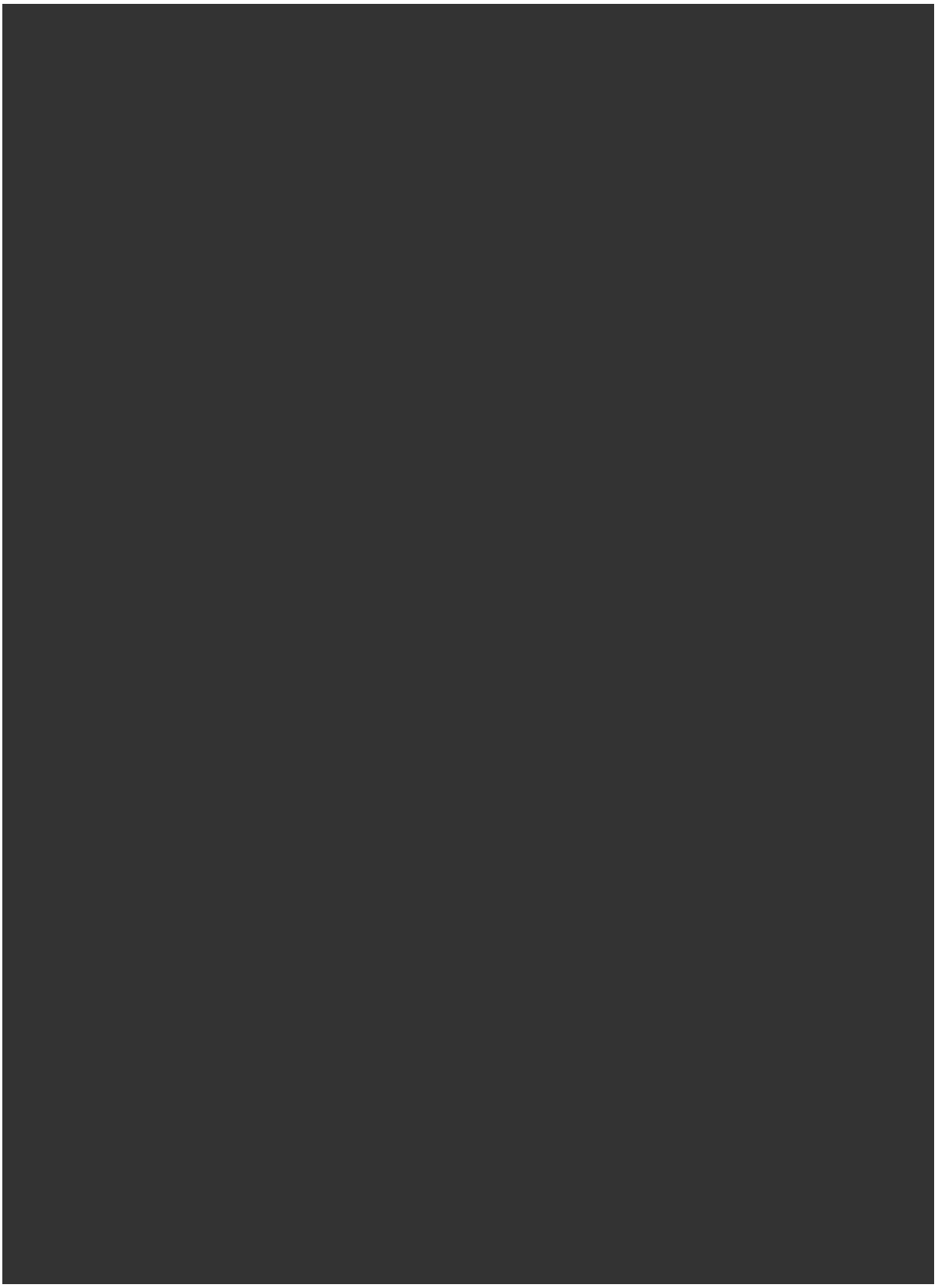
Decrease Allowance Function



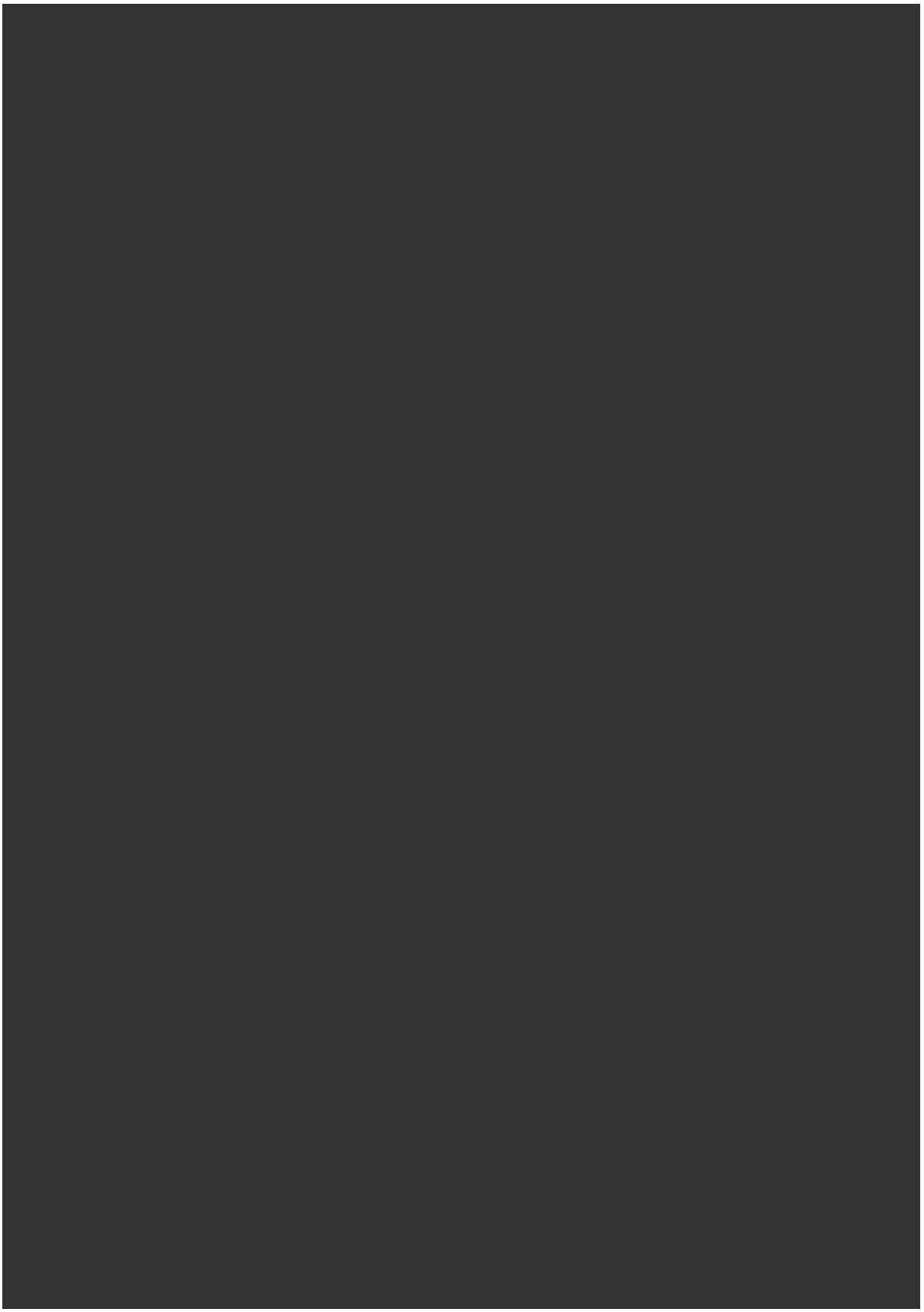
Appendix F: Code Generated by Smart Contract Builder for Open Auction

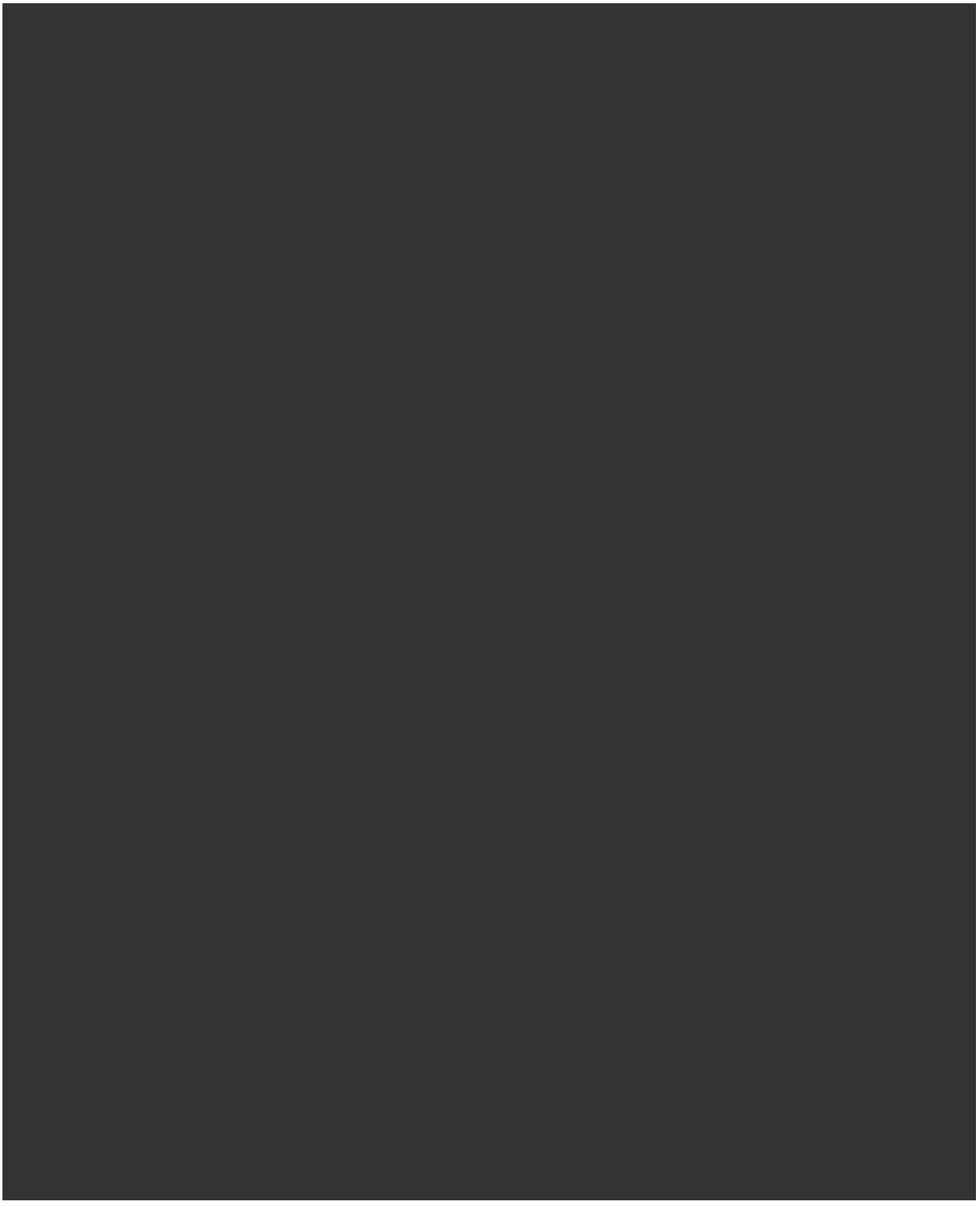


Appendix G: Code Generated by Smart Contract Builder for Safe Remote Purchase

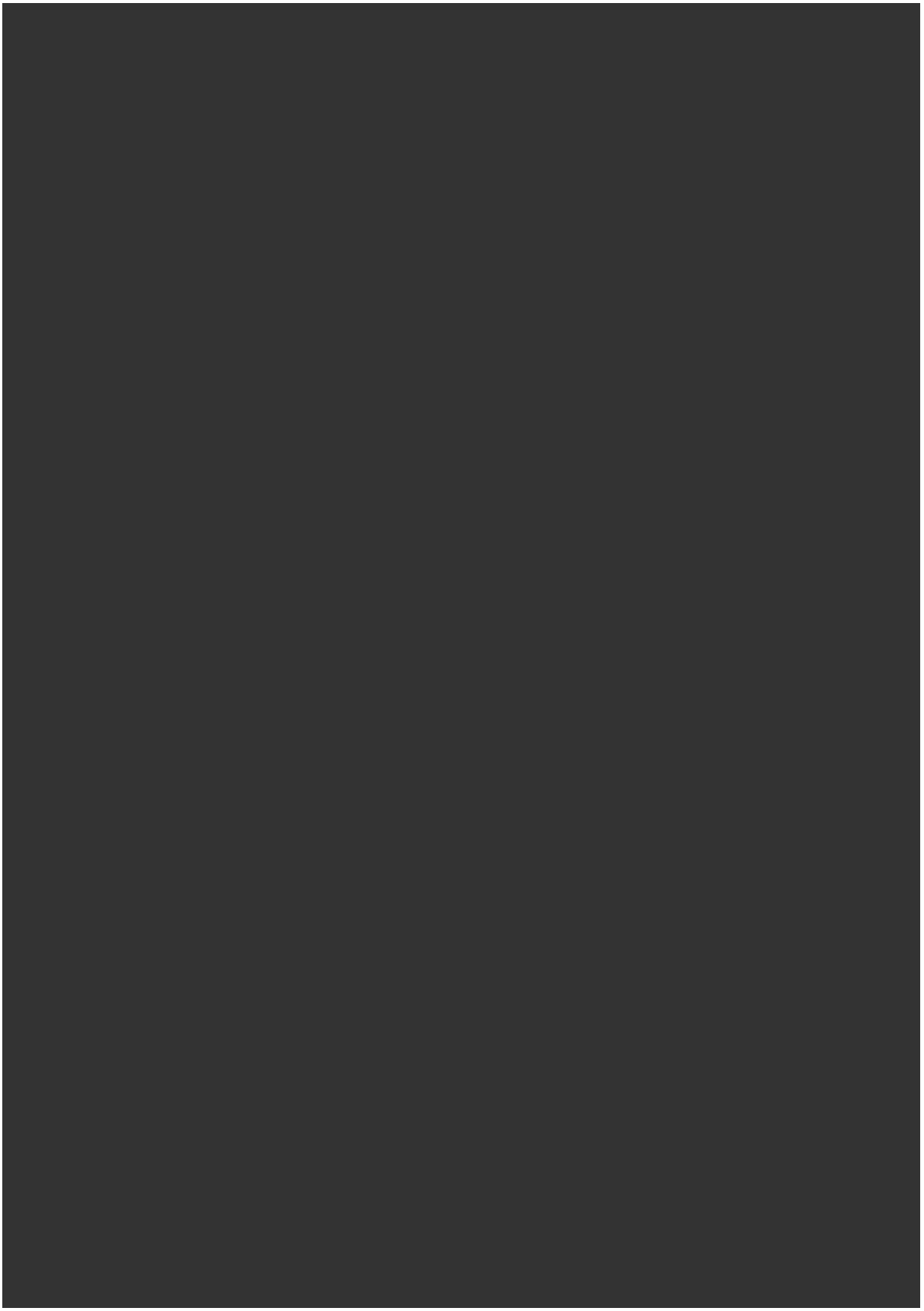


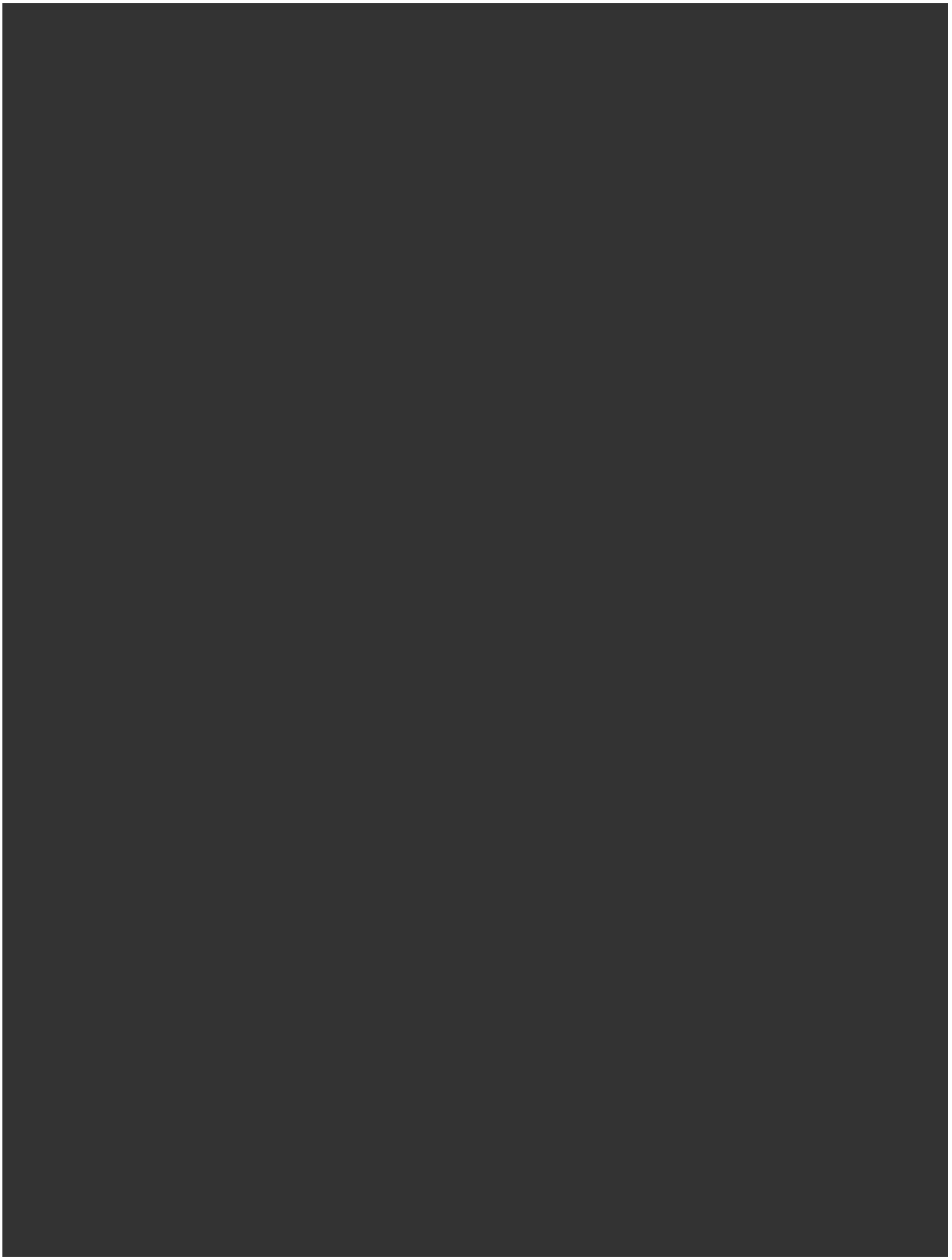
Appendix H: Code Generated by Smart Contract Builder for Voting





Appendix I: Code Generated by Smart Contract Builder for ERC20 Token





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