

A First Look at the Usability of Web3 DApps

Abstract. While the usability literature has considered both web 2.0 web services, as well as crypto-currencies like Bitcoin, web3 is more than the sum of these parts. Web3 decentralized applications (DApps) deploy a unique model that creates new usability challenges and risks to user data and funds. This paper uses an expert evaluation method to identify usability challenges across 50 popular Ethereum DApps found ‘in the wild,’ used alongside the popular wallet MetaMask. Our evaluation uncovers four common usability challenges impacting users’ ability to make informed decisions, and points to opportunities for future user studies and areas for improvement.

1 Introduction

When Ethereum introduced smart contracts that can be executed on a blockchain, user interfaces had to be rethought. Ethereum users are no longer merely making payments to a receiving address, they are interacting in arbitrary ways with decentralized applications (DApps) to perform more complex tasks like trading assets, establishing loans, bidding in auctions, and registering domain names. Furthermore, new DApps emerge too frequently for standalone wallet software—the kind that dominates the Bitcoin ecosystem—to stay updated. The idea that users might transact with smart contracts in a ‘raw’ way, by manually supplying a contract address, function to be run, and parameters to the function, was an obvious non-starter for non-expert users.

The solution is what is we now call web3 (see Figure 1). A DApp augments the smart contract with a companion website, accessible over the standard internet, which provides a user interface and mostly abstracts away the technical details of the contract. The connection between the website and the blockchain is convoluted however, hence the need for a usability analysis. Websites typically pass scripts to the user and the website, now running client-side, will interact with third party APIs to fetch up-to-date blockchain data that is general to all users. To customize the content for the specific user, the website does not maintain accounts server-side for its users, as in web 2.0. Instead the user is expected to run a standalone client, called a wallet (as in Bitcoin). After authorization, the wallet will supply the user’s addresses to the website, and the website can propose blockchain actions to the wallet to present to the user for signature.

In summary, (i) users interact with a website first, rather than their wallet; (ii) after user authorization, the website and wallet can pass data between them; (iii) the wallet is agnostic about what the DApp is or does; (iv) all authorizations are done by the user in the wallet software; and (v) users will be asked to sign transactions in their wallet that they, and the wallet itself, will not ‘understand,’ instead relying on the trustworthiness of the website proposing the transaction.

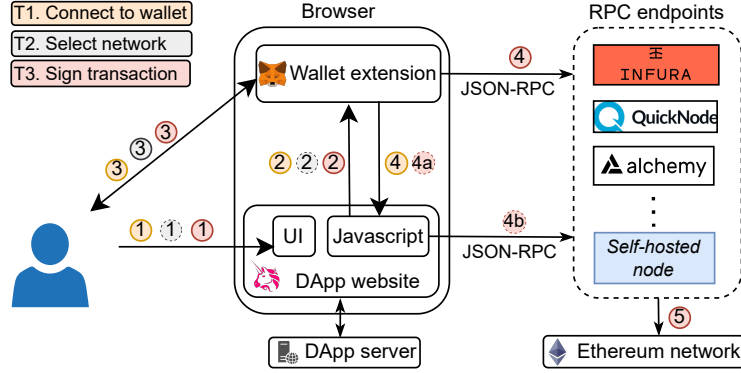


Fig. 1. Overview of web3 architecture and user workflow for three common tasks. In T1, the user selects “connect wallet” on the DApp ① which requests the user’s Ethereum address ②; the wallet obtains user approval ③ and returns the address ④. In T2, the user selects a blockchain network on the DApp ① which triggers the wallet ② to prompt the user to switch network ③; alternatively, the user can directly switch network from the wallet. In T3, the user initiates a transaction on the DApp ① which sends it to the wallet ②; the wallet prompts the user for approval ③ and if approved, the wallet sends a signed transaction to an Ethereum node via JSON-RPC APIs ④ which is then broadcast to the Ethereum network ⑤; alternatively, the signed transactions could be routed through the DApp ④a before reaching the network ④b.

Our work investigates usability challenges in popular DApp and wallet interfaces. Malicious DApps exploit the complex arrangement between users, DApps, and wallets, attempting to deceive users into granting permissions to their data and access to their funds [?,?]. Before deploying full-blown user studies, expert review is used as a starting point to identify key areas requiring attention. In this short paper, we perform this first step, setting a research agenda for more detailed follow-up work. To this end, our contributions include (i) we conduct an expert review of the top 50 DApps using an established methodology called a cognitive walkthrough [?]; (ii) based on our review, we explicate four common usability challenges in current interfaces; and (iii) we describe potential interface improvements to address these challenges to limit user errors and better inform users about permissions granted to DApps.

2 Background

In web 2.0, apps are designed with a front-end website associated with a centralized back-end server and maintained by the website owner. Web3 redesigns this structure by replacing centralized services with a blockchain—a network of anonymous validators that store and run programs in exchange for financial rewards (referred to as “gas” fees).¹ Program logic is defined into *contracts* which

¹ In practice, much of web3 traffic relies on services resembling centralization (cf. [?])

run on a virtual environment called the Ethereum Virtual Machine (EVM). We discuss related aspects next. Figure 1 illustrates the web3 components involved in common tasks performed by users of DApps.

Wallet-DApp interaction. The primary mode for user authorizations for DApps is through wallets typically installed as browser extensions. Wallets such as MetaMask inject the Ethereum Provider API [?] into every website visited by the user, enabling the sites to discover wallets (e.g., through injected fields such as `window.provider.isMetaMask` [?]) and to create wallet prompts for approval to trigger contracts. DApps can also use other Ethereum methods [?] to send requests to the wallet for account addresses (`eth_requestAccounts`) and transaction requests (`eth_sendTransaction`), which are prompted to the user for approval.

EVM blockchains. Another feature of web3 is its scalability enabled by individual blockchains with distinct features (e.g., lower gas fees, and faster transactions).² These blockchains, also referred to as *sidechains* and *Layer 2* (L2) chains, run in parallel to the main Ethereum blockchain (L1) but adhere to Ethereum standards, so wallet software can interoperate with only a chain ID (unique identifier for the blockchain) and the Remote Procedure Call (RPC) URL (address of the remote server which acts as the gateway for the DApp to access the blockchain nodes). Many DApps integrate with multiple chains to support transactions across the ecosystem.

RPC endpoints. DApps and wallets rely on RPC endpoints³ to exchange transaction data with EVM networks, using the standard JSON-RPC API [?]. For instance, MetaMask relies on Infura as its default endpoint [?]; note that these separate services are both owned by the same entity. These endpoints relate to different privacy implications, e.g., some providers maintain logs of user data transmitted through their servers while others state that they do not collect any user data. Thus, it is important for users to choose endpoints that align with their privacy preferences.

3 Related work

The usability literature has explored Bitcoin [?,?,?,?] and generic blockchain technology [?,?,?]. In terms of Ethereum, web3, and wallets such as MetaMask, the literature has focused on user perceptions. Panicker et al. [?] found that users do not fully comprehend risks involved in token transfers in MetaMask UIs due to a lack of information about outcomes. Analyzing app reviews of mobile wallets, Voskoboynikov et al. [?] observed misinformed mental models due to an overreliance on understanding of traditional web 2.0 systems. Si et al. [?] explored user interactions and risk perceptions across the Web3 ecosystem, finding user concerns about vulnerable contracts and social engineering attacks

² As of Sept 2024, 1,061 blockchains as per <https://chainlist.org/>

³ <https://rpc.info/>

involving inadvertent approvals. By contrast, our study learns through direct interaction with a broad set of popular DApps ‘in the wild.’

4 Methodology

A cognitive walkthrough [?] is a usability evaluation methodology often employed first to establish a priority list of usability issues to be considered with other methods. A dual expert (knowledgeable in both usability and in the domain of study—web3, in our case) evaluates if users with a specific persona (*e.g.*, no prior familiarity) can successfully use an application interface and complete a set of core tasks without violating a set of guidelines. For our study, we define our core tasks as:

- T1. Connect preferred wallet (MetaMask) to a given DApp website.
- T2. Configure wallet to connect to a specific blockchain network (if it is not already on this network) supported by the DApp; this may be different on each DApp depending on the network on which it is built.
- T3. Approve transactions by signing token transfer requests from their wallet to the DApp’s contract.

We draw our guidelines directly from the established usability literature—specifically past studies of Bitcoin [?,?]. We repeat verbatim:

- G1. Users should be aware of the steps they have to perform to complete a core task.
- G2. Users should be able to determine how to perform these steps.
- G3. Users should know when they have successfully completed a core task.
- G4. Users should be able to recognize, diagnose, and recover from non-critical errors.
- G5. Users should not make dangerous errors from which they cannot recover.
- G6. Users should be comfortable with the terminology used in any interface dialogues or documentation.
- G7. Users should be sufficiently comfortable with the interface to continue using it.
- G8. Users should be aware of the application’s status at all times.

A walkthrough allows for an evaluation across a large number of DApps, in contrast to time-limited and costly user studies. During our initial analysis, two evaluators defined the core tasks and discussed walkthrough results of two popular DApps (ENS and Uniswap). After refinement based on this analysis, the main researcher evaluated each of the top 50 DApps listed on *DAppRadar*,⁴ ranked by the total value of assets held under the smart contract over a 30-day period, as of Sept 2, 2024. We used the most popular wallet MetaMask.

⁴ <https://dappradar.com/>

4.1 A Sample Walkthrough

For space considerations, we do not present the full details of each walkthrough of 3 tasks over 50 DApps. Instead, we present one representative sample walkthrough to illustrate what the methodology looks like, and then we present our overall results, based on all walkthroughs, in the next section. The sample is the (T3) transaction approval task in the DApp Uniswap [?], a decentralized exchange service on Ethereum allowing users to exchange one type of (ERC-20) token for another. We assume the persona of a typical web3 user who owns one or more tokens, uses a common wallet such as MetaMask, and has basic understanding about Ethereum tokens and transactions. For this task, we also assume the user has already connected their wallet to Uniswap (T1) and successfully switched to a target network (T2).

The swap page on Uniswap site prompts the user to select the tokens and the exchange amounts. After selecting a token (ETH) to sell, the prompt shows the available balance and an option to use the maximum amount. We input an arbitrary amount to sell. Then, we selected to buy USDT using the search option. The search displayed the correct token only when the input exactly matched “USDT”. Other variations (e.g., “usdt” or “tether”) did not yield similar results, violating G1. The results included two tokens displayed with the same name “Tether USD” and symbol “USDT”, though with different icons and addresses. Selecting any of the two tokens prompted a warning stating that the token is not popular among past transactions, however only one of the token included a warning icon. Although these warnings aim to alert users about potential scams, conflicting cues likely cause confusion and impact the effectiveness of warnings.

Uniswap triggers a wallet prompt with details about the transaction. At the top of the prompt, a small icon beside the contract address displays a generic message prompting users to verify before trusting the contract. This violates G2 as there is no guidance on how to verify. The prompt also includes a section with predictions about the resulting balance changes, however this is not guaranteed as indicated within an icon. We discuss this issue further in Sec. 5.3. The prompt also includes estimated gas fees and an option to set a limit on the maximum fee. This option (in a new prompt) lists four choices with different limits and processing times (options with lower fees tradeoff on longer wait times).

After selecting “low” gas and submitting the transaction, the wallet notified that the transaction had failed without any description of the issue. An external link from the wallet showed the error output directly from the contract, however this message is ambiguous with no instructions on recovery options. This violates G4. Uniswap’s troubleshooting guide [?] lists potential reasons for transaction failures including possible issues caused by low gas limits, although users cannot be expected to find such resources for each transaction failure.⁵ The DApp/wallet interface can address these issues by explaining transaction failures and providing instructions on possible recovery options.

⁵ We attempted another transaction submitting with the default (“market”) gas fee limit, which was successful.

5 High Priority Usability Issues

We now present the highest priority issues we found during our walkthroughs of 50 DApps, focusing on issues that may lead users to make dangerous errors (G5). We would direct future research efforts to consider these issues.

5.1 Issue 1: Weak link between wallet prompts and DApps

Users can have multiple DApp websites open at once, while the wallet is a singular and separate interface. We found MetaMask attempts to associate prompts with its originating DApp by displaying domain names, however it is inconsistent. In some cases, it does not link prompts to websites: *e.g.*, ‘allow *this site* to add a network?’ Connecting to a malicious network compromises the user’s privacy (links user’s IP address and wallet addresses), displays information about the state of the blockchain, and can propose fraudulent transactions (timed to follow specific user actions). In other cases, the domain is shown but the visual cue varies (boxed/rounded/unboxed; domain/url/favicon; sizes/colors/locations).

Transactions can also queue, say if a user forgets to sign/cancel a transaction in MetaMask or clicks multiple times on the website. MetaMask indicates the number of current requests in the extension icon and a textual indicator in a small font size, but is easy to miss. Users, who have unknowingly queued a transaction and proceed to a new DApp where they take an action that creates a transaction, will be presented with the earlier queued transaction for signature first.

Recommendation: A previous paper [?] introduces TLS-based authentication of contracts and proposes augmenting MetaMask interface with warnings (similar to web 2.0 browser certificates), though MetaMask has not included such proposals. We recommend that the requesting DApp’s URL is in every wallet prompt in a standard format (i.e., location in the UI) across all DApps. The wallet could also warn users when the requesting DApp is not in the current (in-focus) view, bring the requesting DApp’s web page to in-focus view, or disable the approve button until the page is in focus to limit inadvertent approvals.

5.2 Issue 2: Cross-chain switching issues

It is a common task for users to switch their wallet to different networks when interacting with DApps. When adding a new network to the wallet, it is the user’s responsibility to evaluate its security and privacy as MetaMask does not verify. However, this tends to be an arbitrary process where users need to rely on ad-hoc web searches to check the network [?]. This manual process is also extensive as it involves verifying the individual details displayed about the network including the network’s name, RPC URL, chain ID and its currency.

There are three options for adding a new network on a MetaMask wallet, and each option may involve different privacy and security implications:

1. Users may add a new network from a DApp site (e.g., by initiating a transaction on the relevant blockchain) which would send the wallet information about the network including the DApp’s preferred RPC URL. In this case, the wallet simply displays this information and prompts the user to add the network. This prompt does not allow the user to select a different (e.g., more privacy-friendly) RPC provider, or even indicate the possibility of changing providers. Thus, users may consent to using the displayed network though they may not be fully informed or even aware of more privacy-friendly choices.
2. Second, for a subset of (popular) networks, users can add the network automatically from the wallet interface using network details pre-filled by the wallet. Wallets may be able to inform users about potential security and privacy issues with these providers, however, this may be possible only for a limited number of networks.
3. Third, users can add a network on their wallet by manually entering all the network details including their preferred RPC provider. Although this option offers the most control to users, it may not be straightforward to identify legitimate network providers that are secure and private.

These issues complicate the process of adding networks to the wallet by requiring users to perform multiple out-of-band checks (i.e., breaks the user’s workflow for the task by involving external resources and ad-hoc web searches). MetaMask prompts include multiple warnings when any the network information (e.g., name, RPC URL, or currency) provided by the DApp do not match its own records. However, users may become desensitized to security warnings especially when they are frequently linked to false alarms [?].

Recommendation: When adding a network, users should be made aware of alternative providers who may offer better security and privacy. To this end, when adding networks via DApps, wallets can simply display an option to change the provider before adding to the wallet. It is important for users to be informed about available choices before they make a decision since adding a network to the wallet immediately exposes personal information such as user’s IP address and wallet addresses (which can then be linked to past transactions, compromising privacy). To further support informed user decisions, DApps and wallets could list more than one provider for the user to choose from, and provide information about the benefits of each network in terms of speed of transactions, gas fees, security and privacy properties; existing resources such as ChainList⁶ already provide information about alternative RPC servers and their privacy and speed.

5.3 Issue 3: Unpredictable function behaviour

When prompting for a transaction approval, MetaMask includes predicted changes to the user’s balances (i.e., the amount “sent” and amount “received”) for recognized tokens and blockchains [?]. These predictions may mislead users into

⁶ <https://chainlist.org/?chain=1>

falsely assuming that running the contract would actually result in receiving tokens whereas the wallet does not perform any security checks, i.e., misplacing trust on the contract despite the lack of validation and security checks. Though the wallet warns (in a small icon) that the predictions are not guaranteed, users may not fully comprehend the risks or miss the warning completely.

Other approaches have been proposed to extract information about contracts. Solidity, the primary language for contracts, provides developers the ability to write special user-facing comments about their contract code [?]. However, most of the contracts in the wild do not include such comments [?]. Automated generation of these comments could help fill this gap [?] but such comments may not provide accurate descriptions of contracts and may lead some users into a false sense of security. Another line of research focuses on security tools (e.g., [?, ?]) to identify vulnerable contracts, however informing users about these issues (e.g., in end-user interfaces) remains an open challenge.

Recommendation: Wallets should use a standard interface design to inform users about contract risks. When interfaces includes predictions about balance changes, it should clearly warn users about the lack of validation about the DApp to limit false trust assumptions. All warnings should be displayed using a standard and prominent format. Future research can determine the extent to which malicious behaviour can be predicted through automated analysis (or DApps could default to untrusted until certified).

5.4 Issue 4: Concerns with *Allowance* mechanism

The final issue has been explored in the literature by Wang *et al* [?] but we include the issue for completeness. Tokens deployed on Ethereum follow standard interfaces, such as ERC20, meaning wallet software can interoperate even without knowing anything specific about the token. The ERC20 standard requires an ‘approve’ function. Instead of Alice sending 10 tokens to Bob, she can approve Bob to take 10 tokens from her at any time until she removes the approval. Many DApps move tokens through approvals rather than transfers. Prioritizing simplicity and flexibility over security, 60% of DApps in [?] request *unlimited* approvals. Unlimited approvals are problematic when a DApp is later compromised (or malicious to begin with) [?, ?]. Some DApps provide no option to adjust the approval amount, while some have been found to display one amount but prompt for unlimited (observed in [?] as an example of a deceptive/dark pattern [?]). While MetaMask does allow approvals to be adjusted, once set, it is up to the user to remember to un-approve.

Recommendation: Attention has been given to allowing users to view, modify, and revoke past approvals, both in the MetaMask dashboard and through third-party tools (e.g., `revoke.cash` [?]). Because of the ERC20 standard, wallets should recognize an unlimited approval and better warn users, schedule a reminder prompt to revoke for a later time, or allow users to set global limits (with sensible default values) on allowances.

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