Psamathe: A DSL for Safe Blockchain Assets

Reed Oei
University of Illinois
reedoei2@illinois.edu

ABSTRACT

Blockchains host smart contracts for crowdfunding, tokens, and many other purposes. However, vulnerabilities in contracts are often discovered, leading to the loss of large quantities of money. Psamathe is a new language we are designing around a new flow abstraction, reducing asset bugs and making contracts more concise than in existing languages. We present an overview of Psamathe, and discuss two example contracts in Psamathe and Solidity.

1 INTRODUCTION

Blockchains are increasingly used as platforms for applications called *smart contracts* [16], which automatically manage transactions in an unbiased, mutually agreed-upon way. Commonly proposed and implemented smart contracts include supply chain management [11], healthcare [10], *token contracts*, voting, crowdfunding, auctions, and more [9]. A *token contract* is a contract implementing a *token standard*, such as ERC-20 [1]. Smart contracts often manage *digital assets*, such as cryptocurrencies, or, depending on the application, bids in an auction, votes in an election, and so on. Token contracts are common on the Ethereum blockchain [17]—about 73% of high-activity contracts are token contracts [13]. Smart contracts cannot be patched after being deployed, even if a security vulnerability is discovered. Some estimates suggest that as many as 46% of smart contracts may have some vulnerability [12].

Psamathe (/sɑmɑθi/) is a new programming language we are designing to write safer smart contracts, focused on a new abstraction, a *flow*, representing an atomic transfer. The Psamathe language will also provide features to mark types with *modifiers*, such as **asset**, which combine with flows to make some classes of bugs impossible.

Solidity is the most commonly-used smart contract language on the Ethereum blockchain [2], and does not provide analogous support for managing assets. Additionally, typical smart contracts are more **concise** in Psamathe than in Solidity, because Psamathe handles common patterns and pitfalls automatically.

Other newly-proposed blockchain languages include Flint, Move, Nomos, Obsidian, and Scilla [6–8, 14, 15]. Scilla and Move are intermediate-level languages, whereas Psamathe is a high-level language. Obsidian, Move, Nomos, and Flint use linear or affine

```
1  contract ERC20 {
2    type Token is fungible asset uint
3    balances : any map one address => any Token
4    transaction transfer(dst : one address, amount : any uint):
5      balances[msg.sender] --[ amount ]-> balances[dst]
6  }
```

Figure 1: A Psamathe contract with a simple transfer function, which transfers amount tokens from the sender's account to the destination account. It is implemented with a single flow, which automatically checks all the preconditions to ensure the transfer is valid.

types to manage assets; Psamathe uses *type quantities*, which provide the benefits of *linear types*, but allow a more precise analysis of the flow of values in a program. None of the these languages have flows or provide support for all the modifiers that Psamathe does.

2 LANGUAGE

A Psamathe program is made of *contracts*, each containing *fields*, *types*, and *functions*. Each contract instance in Psamathe represents a contract on the blockchain, and the fields provide persistent storage. Figure 1 shows a simple contract declaring a type, a field, and a transaction, which implements the core of ERC-20's transfer function. ERC-20 is a standard for token contracts managing *fungible* tokens, which are interchangeable like most currencies.

Psamathe is built around the concept of a *flow*. Flows have a *source*, a *destination*, and an optional *selector*; when executed, every value selected in the source (by default, everything) is removed from the source and combine with the values in the destination. On line 5 of Figure 1, the source is balances[msg.sender], the destination is balances[dst], and the selector is amount. Using the more declarative, *flow-based* approach provides the following advantages:

- **Precondition checking**: Psamathe automatically inserts dynamic checks of a flow's validity; e.g., a flow of money would fail if there is not enough in the source, or if there is too much in the destination (e.g., due to overflow).
- **Data-flow tracking**: We hypothesize that flows provide a clearer way of specifying how resources flow in the code itself, which may be less apparent using other approaches, especially in complicated contracts. Additionally, developers must explicitly mark when assets are *consumed*, and only assets marked as **consumable** may be consumed.
- **Error messages**: When a flow fails, Psamathe provides automatic, descriptive error messages, using information in the code of the flow, such as:

  ```
  Cannot flow <amount> Token from account[<src>] to
  account[<dst>]: source only has <balance> Token.
  ```

```
1  contract ERC20 {
2    mapping (address => uint) balances;
3    function transfer(address dst, uint amount) public {
4      require(amount <= balances[msg.sender]);
5      balances[msg.sender] =
6        balances[msg.sender].sub(amount);
7      balances[dst] = balances[dst].add(amount);
8    }
9  }
```

Figure 2: An implementation of ERC-20's transfer function in Solidity from one of the reference implementations [5]. All preconditions are checked manually. Note that we must include the SafeMath library (not shown), which checks for underflow/overflow, to use the add and sub functions.

Each variable, field, and function parameter has a *type quantity*, approximating the number of values in the variable, which is one of: empty, any, one, nonempty, or every. Type quantities are inferred if omitted; every type quantity in Figure 1 can be inferred. Only empty asset variables may be dropped.

Modifiers can be used to place constraints on how values are managed: **asset**, **fungible**, **unique**, and **consumable**. An **asset** is a value that must not be reused or accidentally lost. A **fungible** value represents a quantity that can be **merged**. For example, ERC-20 tokens are **fungible**. A **unique** value only exists in at most one variable, enforced by a dynamic check when the value is created; it must be an **asset** to ensure it is not duplicated. ERC-721 tokens are **unique**. A **consumable** value is an **asset** that it may be appropriate to dispose of, done via the consume construct, documenting that the disposal is intentional.

Psamathe has transactional semantics: a sequence of flows will either all succeed, or, if a single flow fails, the rest will fail as well. If a sequence of flows fails, the error propagates, like an exception, until it either: a) reaches the top level, and the entire transaction fails; or b) reaches a **catch**, and then only the changes made in the corresponding **try** will revert, and the **catch** block will execute.

3 EXAMPLES

The complete Solidity and Psamathe code is in our repository [3].

3.1 ERC-20

Figure 2 shows a Solidity implementation of the ERC-20 function transfer (cf. Figure 1). This example shows the advantages of flows in precondition checking, data-flow tracking, and error messages. In this case, the sender's balance must be at least as large as amount, and the destination's balance must not overflow when it receives the tokens. Psamathe automatically inserts code checking these two conditions, ensuring that the checks are not forgotten.

3.2 Voting

One proposed use for blockchains is for voting [9]. Figures 3 and 4 show the core of an implementation of a voting contract in Psamathe and Solidity, respectively, based on the Solidity by Example tutorial [4]. Each contract instance has several proposals, and users must be given permission to vote by the chairperson, assigned in

the constructor of the contract (not shown). Each user can vote exactly once for exactly one proposal, and the proposal with the most votes wins. Note that values of type address are used to *select* Voters on line 13. We can do this because the *underlying type* of Voter is address—allowing us to refer to assets without the asset itself, which is very convenient when writing such contracts.

This example shows Psamathe is suited for a range of applications. It also shows some uses of the **unique** modifier; in this contract, **unique** ensures that each user, represented by an address, can be given permission to vote at most once, while the use of **asset** ensures that votes are not lost or double-counted.

4 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

We have presented the Psamathe language for writing safer smart contracts. Psamathe uses the new flow abstraction, assets, and modifiers to provide safety guarantees for smart contracts. We showed two examples of smart contracts in both Solidity and Psamathe, showing that Psamathe is capable of expressing common smart contract functionality in a concise manner, while retaining key safety properties.

In the future, we plan to implement the Psamathe language, and prove its safety properties. We also hope to study the benefits and costs of the language via case studies, performance evaluation, and the application of flows to other domains. Finally, we would also like to conduct a user study to evaluate the usability of the flow abstraction and the design of the language, and to compare it to Solidity, which we hypothesize will show that developers write contracts with fewer asset management errors in Psamathe than in Solidity.

```
1  contract Ballot {
2    struct Voter { uint weight; bool voted; uint vote; }
3    struct Proposal { bytes32 name; uint voteCount; }
4
5    address public chairperson;
6    mapping(address => Voter) public voters;
7    Proposal[] public proposals;
8
9    function giveRightToVote(address voter) public {
10     require(msg.sender == chairperson,
11       "Only chairperson can give right to vote.");
12     require(!voters[voter].voted,
13       "The voter already voted.");
14     voters[voter].weight = 1;
15   }
16   function vote(uint proposal) public {
17     Voter storage sender = voters[msg.sender];
18     require(sender.weight != 0, "No right to vote");
19     require(!sender.voted, "Already voted.");
20     sender.voted = true;
21     sender.vote = proposal;
22     proposals[proposal].voteCount += sender.weight;
23   }
24 }
```

Figure 4: A simple voting contract in Solidity.

```
1  contract Ballot {
2    type Voter is unique asset address
3    type ProposalName is unique asset string
4
5    chairperson : address
6    voters : set Voter
7    proposals : map ProposalName => set Voter
8
9    transaction giveRightToVote(voter : address):
10     only when msg.sender = chairperson
11     new Voter(voter) --> voters
12   transaction vote(proposal : string):
13     voters --[ msg.sender ]-> proposals[proposal]
14 }
```

Figure 3: A simple voting contract in Psamathe.

REFERENCES

[1] 2015. EIP 20: ERC-20 Token Standard. Retrieved 2020-07-28 from https://eips.ethereum.org/EIPS/eip-20

[2] 2020. Ethereum for Developers. Retrieved 2020-07-31 from https://ethereum.org/en/developers/

[3] 2020. Psamathe. https://github.com/ReedOei/Psamathe

[4] 2020. Solidity by Example. Retrieved 2020-07-28 from https://solidity.readthedocs.io/en/v0.7.0/solidity-by-example.html

[5] 2020. Tokens. Retrieved 2020-08-03 from https://github.com/ConsenSys/Tokens

[6] Sam Blackshear, Evan Cheng, David L Dill, Victor Gao, Ben Maurer, Todd Nowacki, Alistair Pott, Shaz Qadeer, Dario Russi Rain, Stephane Sezer, et al. 2019. Move: A language with programmable resources.

[7] Michael Coblenz, Reed Oei, Tyler Etzel, Paulette Koronkevich, Miles Baker, Yannick Bloem, Brad A. Myers, Joshua Sunshine, and Jonathan Aldrich. 2019. Obsidian: Typestate and Assets for Safer Blockchain Programming. arXiv:cs.PL/1909.03523

[8] Ankush Das, Stephanie Balzer, Jan Hoffmann, Frank Pfenning, and Ishani Santurkar. 2019. Resource-aware session types for digital contracts. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1902.06056* (2019).

[9] Chris Elsden, Arthi Manohar, Jo Briggs, Mike Harding, Chris Speed, and John Vines. 2018. Making Sense of Blockchain Applications: A Typology for HCI. In *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Montreal QC, Canada) *(CHI '18)*. 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3174032

[10] Harvard Business Review. 2017. The Potential for Blockchain to Transform Electronic Health Records. Retrieved February 18, 2020 from https://hbr.org/2017/03/the-potential-for-blockchain-to-transform-electronic-health-records

[11] IBM. 2019. Blockchain for supply chain. Retrieved March 31, 2019 from https://www.ibm.com/blockchain/supply-chain/

[12] Loi Luu, Duc-Hiep Chu, Hrishi Olickel, Prateek Saxena, and Aquinas Hobor. 2016. Making Smart Contracts Smarter. In *Proceedings of the 2016 ACM SIGSAC Conference on Computer and Communications Security* (Vienna, Austria) *(CCS '16)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 254–269. https://doi.org/10.1145/2976749.2978309

[13] Gustavo Oliva, Ahmed E. Hassan, and Zhen Jiang. 2019. An Exploratory Study of Smart Contracts in the Ethereum Blockchain Platform. *Empirical Software Engineering* (11 2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10664-019-09796-5

[14] Franklin Schrans, Susan Eisenbach, and Sophia Drossopoulou. 2018. Writing safe smart contracts in Flint. In *Conference Companion of the 2nd International Conference on Art, Science, and Engineering of Programming*. 218–219.

[15] Ilya Sergey, Vaivaswatha Nagaraj, Jacob Johannsen, Amrit Kumar, Anton Trunov, and Ken Chan Guan Hao. 2019. Safer Smart Contract Programming with Scilla. *Proc. ACM Program. Lang.* 3, OOPSLA, Article 185 (Oct. 2019), 30 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3360611

[16] Nick Szabo. 1997. Formalizing and Securing Relationships on Public Networks. *First Monday* 2, 9 (1997). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v2i9.548

[17] Gavin Wood et al. 2014. Ethereum: A secure decentralised generalised transaction ledger. *Ethereum project yellow paper* 151, 2014 (2014), 1–32.