# Semantic Blockchain

## Introduction

*Semantic Blockchain as a name combines two of the hottest buzzwords of the 2010’s. To the casual observer this may look like hype breeding hype. A deeper examination however reveals a very different picture. While the underlying topic areas “Semantic” and “Blockchain” have been evolving over centuries and decades respectively the meteoric rise of their importance as fields of study and practical application is neither accidental nor coincidental. Both are different aspects of the monumental transformation our global society is undergoing as we move more and more social, political, legal, economic and technical interactions and transactions into new virtual, dematerialised forms underpinned by the capabilities of digital technology. Almost all such interactions and transactions require the ability for participants to obtain two types of certainty: First is the certainty that the meaning of key communications is the same for all participants at critical points during an interaction and that all critical elements of a transaction have the same meaning to all participants. The second certainty required is that there is certainty about whether and under what circumstances agreement has taken place between participants in an interaction or transaction. It is worth to consider each in turn.*

### 1.1 The Need for Certainty of Meaning

The requirement for certainty of meaning is so intuitive and so fundamental that it is often taken for granted. Every type of social, political, legal, economic and technical interaction or transaction has informal and/or formal protocols for achieving certainty of meaning at critical points. Often participants are not even fully aware of these protocols or how they work but this does in no way diminish their critical importance. As we create digital twins of existing interactions or transactions or even create entirely new digital interactions or transactions we need to re-engineer these protocols or create them from scratch. The term **semantics** as widely understood today refers to this process of creating of such digital protocols for getting certainty of meaning. The seminal **[Berners-Lee et al 2001]** article on the semantic web not only signposted the rise of activity in this field also highlighted the fact that digital networks and the digital interactions and transaction they enable can and must be supported by digital means for establishing certainty of meaning. Since then a new cottage industry has arisen around the creation of digital ontologies and the theoretical insight, methods, notations and tools needed for their construction. The present book is just another sign of this.

It is worth considering though whether certainty of meaning by itself is enough and would also mean participants have certainty of agreement. An indicator that it may not be the case is that the combination of semantics with blockchain is more recent and research activity started to increase in the early 2010’s. **[Ugarte 2017]** provides a great account of some of this early research as well as details on how semantic web concepts like linked data and digital ontologies based on OWL can and have been applied to financial and other commercial interactions and transactions in combination with block chain technologies such as Bitcoin and Ethereum. Indeed referring to **[Berners-Lee et al 2006]** Ugarte **[Ugarte 2017, p1]** points out that from the 2005 onwards there was a realisation that semantics alone was not the answer. In the article referred to, Tim Berners Lee sets out his vision:

*“.I have a dream for the Web [in which computers] become capable of analysing all the data on the Web: the content, links, and transactions between people and computers. A ‘Semantic Web’, which should make this possible, has yet to emerge, but when it does, the day-to-day mechanisms of trade, bureaucracy and our daily lives will be handled by machines talking to machines. The ‘intelligent agents’ people have touted for ages will finally materialize...”*

Semantics and digital ontologies are the way to allow machines to obtain certainty of meaning in interactions and transactions. Both Ugarte and Tim Berners Lee make it clear that as we move to a digital world certainty of meaning in a digital context also requires in addition certainty of agreement in a digital context. Before we examine semantics and how it helps machines determine certainty of meaning we therefore need to examine the need for certainty of agreement

### 1.1 The Need for Certainty of Agreement

At an intuitive level it is clear that two participants to a disputed transaction may very well have agreed on the precise meaning of every aspect of the transaction. It could even be that both parties have clear digital evidence that the precise meaning of each and every aspect of the transaction was shared by both of them. But even in that case further evidence is required to ascertain that they both intended and in fact did enter into an agreement on the transaction in question. In other words, agreement is a process, separate and distinct from the meaning of a transaction or the meaning of individual communications in an interaction. A transaction including any form of contract only becomes significant if certain protocols are followed in the interaction between the parties concerned. Certainty of meaning w.r.t to each of the communications relevant to such a protocol is only a necessary precondition but not sufficient in itself for proving that the protocol establishing agreement in the context was indeed adhered to. Creating a digital twin of the protocols that are used in existing human interactions however, is not a trivial challenge Computers have for decades been used to record, transmit or in some form process contracts and other agreements concluded by people. Under certain highly controlled circumstances and with suitable systems and arrangements computers have more recently also started to be used for forming agreement on behalf of the trading partners in situations such as electronic trading between highly trusted partners. Unfortunately the approaches used in those cases do not solve the more general problem that is at the heart of Tim Berners-Lee’s vision above and central to fully digital systems not only in Capital Markets, Banking and Financial Services but also in Government, Commercial and Industrial Supply chains, many IOT (Internet of Things) applications and beyond. The obstacle that needs to be overcome is that in the general case there are no carefully constructed and maintained arrangements in place between two or more parties that want to form an agreement on a transaction either adhoc or as part of a more complex longer running interaction. The problem to be solved is also known as the “Byzantine Generals Problem” and is well described **[Lamport et al 1982],** a paper with the same name. The Byzantine Generals Problem describes the situation of participants who want to have a trusted conversation between each other to reach a consensus decision but are isolated from each other and can only communicate with each other via messages using channels that by themselves are not trustworthy. Leslie Lamport also presented a solution to the problem in **[Lamport et al 1998]** that together with the solution presented in **[Liskov et al 1999] and**  developed independently by Barbara Liskov and colleagues has shaped much of the subsequent research. Early papers like **[Cachin 2001]** were quick to point out applications and such work prepared the ground for HyperLedger, one of the alternatives in the BlockChain space. The other two alternatives that are available at this time are **proof-of-work (PoW)**  and **proof-of-state (PoS) algorithms. *A nice summary of the three approaches is available in [Hammerschmidt 2017].*** One of the early application **PoW** as a consensus mechanism was in HashCash, described by Adam, Back in **[A.Back 2002]**. Satoshi Nakaomoto’s Bitcoin as described in **[Nakamoto 2009]** then built on this earlier work and also uses PoW. **Proof-of-state (PoS) algorithms were developed later to address some of the draw backs of PoW and particularly its inefficient use of energy as described in [Laurie 2011] .** One of the early adopters of was PPCoin described in **[King et al 2012]** and further work by Vitalik Buterin **[Buterin2014]**  and Gavin Wood **[Wood 2014]**  lead to Ethereum which also moved beyond providing a merecrypto coin and provided its own mechanism for creating Smart Contracts directly as part of Ethereum itself. All three approaches, PBFT, PoW and POS continue to be used in the Blockchain space but PBFT and POS are of most interest because of their much higher efficiency.

### 1.3 Combining Blockchain and Semantics

Having looked at the need for both certainty of meaning and certainty of agreement and some of the general solutions for each it is now worth considering how blockchain and semantics can be combined in practice. There are two general ways: First it is possible to create a blockchain mechanism that allows smart contracts or other protocols to be defined using a way that mimics a Turing Machine like eg a microprocessor; the instructions here are telling the mechanism exactly HOW to compute a result but provide no direct insight into what is required. This could be called *semantic blockchain with procedural semantics.* The second approach is to create a block chain mechanism that takes instructions in the form specifications of the required results but without specifying exactly how the result is to be computed; The instructions here specify exactly WHAT is required but leave it to the mechanism to find the precise way for HOW to compute the required result. This could be called *Semantic blockchain with declarative semantics.* It is worth to first consider semantic blockchain with procedural semantics in the next section because it is now widely used in approaches like Ethereum and HyperLegder and then explore how *Semantic blockchain with declarative semantics works and solves some of the challenges arising the context of procedural semantics.*

## Semantic Blockchain with Procedural Semantics

Early Blockchain efforts were either focussed on digital cash like Bitcoin **[Nakamoto 2009]**, controlling resource use like HashCash **[A.Back 2002]** or as in **[Lamport et al 1998]**, and **[Liskov et al 1999] ,** Byzantine Fault Tolerant state machine replication computing primitives to be engineered into wider solutions. Semantics in those early effort was either fixed and implied as in Bitcoin and hash cash or assumed external to the mechanism as in Lamports PAXOS and Liskovs PBFT.

In the early 2010’s researchers and practitioners realised that the computational semantics of platforms like Bitcoin could be used to construct a wide variety of applications. **Hal Hodson’s article “** Bitcoin moves beyond mere money” **HODSON 2013]** in the New Scientist provide an early overview of this activity. However while Bitcoin allows a certain amount of scripting directkly as part of the architecture more complex smart contract require mechanisms to be grafted onto Bitcoin. This realisation lead researchers and practitioners to explore ways in which a broader scripting language could be embedded into new coin designs. In **[Buterin 2014],** Vitalik Buterin describes how Ethereum had been specifically designed for this purpose**. [Bartoletti et al 2017]** provides a broad survey of computational semantics embedded into coins like Bitcoin and Ethereum and their use for constructing smart contracts.

At the same time, also starting in the early 2010, researchers and practitioners also started to look for alternative ways to implement block chain style smart contracts without using coins. Following a line ealier set out by **[Cachin 2001]** one of the best know project that took this direction isHyperLegder. It was created by Dan O’Prey and Daniel Feichtinger (see **[ Swanson 2016] ) and** uses a Practical Byzantine Fault tolerance (PBFT) approach  **( see [Liskov et al 1999] )** to provide a distributed legder that can be used either simply as a ledger or augmented with a procedural mechanism called *chain code* **[Cachin 2017]** to realise smart contracts.

Both the coin based approaches mentioned above and approaches like HyperLegder employ procedural or imperative semantics when it comes to implementing actions like smart contracts. Accoerding to “**imperative programming** is a [programming paradigm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programming_paradigm" \o "Programming paradigm) that uses [statements](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statement_(computer_science)" \o "Statement (computer science)) that change a program's [state](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_(computer_science)" \o "State (computer science))” **[WIKIPEDIA01]** This means that any action in a smart contract is defined in a language similar to either machine code (assembler) or higher-level languages like or similar to C/C++/Java etc. In an imperative program the meaning or intended effect of any action in terms of an application domain is implicit and if an explicit form of the meaning is required it must be synthesised. While imperative blockchain scripts (e.g. Ethereum Code **[Wood 2017]** , HyperLegder Chain Code **[Cachin 2017 ]** ) can and indeed invariably do have carefully constructed computational semantics – that is an ontology of the different code constructs the scripting language provides such an ontology does not allow for direct representation of the business meaning of any specific script.

Imperative blockchain scripts can of course still use carefully constructed domain ontologies for representing data but excluding action semantics means that the burden for ensuring the correct action semantics is firmly assigned to the designer and programmer of a particular smart contract.

The participants to such a smart contract must rely on the representations of the designer, programmer or knowledgeable evaluator when it comes to result or business meaning of each imperative action script in a smart contract using an imperative blockchain script. It is now worth to consider the action semantics first of Ethereum and the HyperLegder in more detail.

### 2.1 A Semantic Blockchain Turing Machine - The Ethereum Approach

The Ethereum yellow paper **[Wood 2017]** carefully defines the Ethereum virtual machine (EVM) and its language (opcodes). Being a stack machine the EVM presents a language has vocabulary and semantics that is essentially the same as that of microprocessors. Given its specialist purpose and the fact that it is a virtual stack machine rather than a physical microprocessor its instruction set is more compact and has a few specialist instructions. Its arithmetic, comparison, bitwise logic and most of its stack, memory and control flow operations are exactly what you would expect to find in a micro processor. (see Figure 1 & 2 below) In addition the EVM introduces specialist hash and block chain operations as well as instructions to ensure e.g. that a contract can only be executed once.

The specialist block chain operations like eg CREATE for creating an account, CALL, for sending a message to an account and CALLDATALOAD for loading data from the environment allow for

Figure 1 EVM INSTRUCTION SET – PART 1

0s: Stop and Arithmetic Operations

0x00 STOP Halts execution

0x01 ADD Addition operation

0x02 MUL Multiplication operation

0x03 SUB Subtraction operation

0x04 DIV Integer division operation

0x05 SDIV Signed integer

0x06 MOD Modulo

0x07 SMOD Signed modulo

0x08 ADDMOD Modulo

0x09 MULMOD Modulo

0x0a EXP Exponential operation

0x0b SIGNEXTEND Extend length of two's complement signed integer

10s: Comparison & Bitwise Logic Operations

0x10 LT Lesser-than comparison

0x11 GT Greater-than comparison

0x12 SLT Signed less-than comparison

0x13 SGT Signed greater-than comparison

0x14 EQ Equality comparison

0x15 ISZERO Simple not operator

0x16 AND Bitwise AND operation

0x17 OR Bitwise OR operation

0x18 XOR Bitwise XOR operation

0x19 NOT Bitwise NOT operation

0x1a BYTE Retrieve single byte from word

20s: SHA3

0x20 SHA3 Compute Keccak-256 hash

30s: Environmental Information

0x30 ADDRESS Get address of currently executing account

0x31 BALANCE Get balance of the given account

0x32 ORIGIN Get execution origination address

0x33 CALLER Get caller address. This is the address of the account that is directly responsible for this execution

0x34 CALLVALUE Get deposited value by the instruction/transaction responsible for this execution

0x35 CALLDATALOAD Get input data of current environment

0x36 CALLDATASIZE Get size of input data in current environment

0x37 CALLDATACOPY Copy input data in current environment to memory

0x38 CODESIZE Get size of code running in current environment

0x39 CODECOPY Copy code running in current environment to memory

0x3a GASPRICE Get price of gas in current environment

0x3b EXTCODESIZE Get size of an account's code

0x3c EXTCODECOPY Copy an account's code to memory

40s: Block Information

0x40 BLOCKHASH Get the hash of one of the 256 most recent complete blocks

0x41 COINBASE Get the block's beneficiary address

0x42 TIMESTAMP Get the block's timestamp

0x43 NUMBER Get the block's number

0x44 DIFFICULTY Get the block's difficulty

0x45 GASLIMIT Get the block's gas limit

Figure 2` EVM INSTRUCTION SET – PART 2

50s Stack, Memory, Storage and Flow Operations

0x50 POP Remove item from stack

0x51 MLOAD Load word from memory

0x52 MSTORE Save word to memory

0x53 MSTORE8 Save byte to memory

0x54 SLOAD Load word from storage

0x55 SSTORE Save word to storage

0x56 JUMP Alter the program counter

0x57 JUMPI Conditionally alter the program counter

0x58 PC Get the value of the program counter prior to the increment

0x59 MSIZE Get the size of active memory in bytes

0x5a GAS Get the amount of available gas, including the corresponding reduction

0x5b JUMPDEST Mark a valid destination for jumps

60s & 70s: Push Operations

0x60 PUSH1 Place 1 byte item on stack

0x61 PUSH2 Place 2-byte item on stack

…

0x7f PUSH32 Place 32-byte (full word) item on stack

80s: Duplication Operations

0x80 DUP1 Duplicate 1st stack item

0x81 DUP2 Duplicate 2nd stack item

…

0x8f DUP16 Duplicate 16th stack item

90s: Exchange Operations

0x90 SWAP1 Exchange 1st and 2nd stack items

0x91 SWAP2 Exchange 1st and 3rd stack items

… …

0x9f SWAP16 Exchange 1st and 17th stack items

a0s: Logging Operations

0xa0 LOG0 Append log record with no topics

0xa1 LOG1 Append log record with one topic

… …

0xa4 LOG4 Append log record with four topics

f0s: System operations

0xf0 CREATE Create a new account with associated code

0xf1 CALL Message-call into an account

0xf2 CALLCODE Message-call into this account with alternative account's code

0xf3 RETURN Halt execution returning output data

0xf4 DELEGATECALL Message-call into this account with an alternative account's code, but persisting the current values for `sender` and `value`

Halt Execution, Mark for deletion

0xff SELFDESTRUCT Halt execution and register account for later deletion

powerful ledger primitives and secure interaction with the outside world. This facilitates creation of legder based smart contracts and provides a secure interface to the outside world.

The core business logic beyond ledger and block chain primitives and data communications with the outside world is then realised with standard stack machine instructions. Because this standard stack machine instruction set is Turing complete any kind of algorithm and data structure can be implemented from first principles. This provides great flexibility and also allows higher level languages to be ported to the EVM using special purpose compilers that generate machine code for the EVM. Because the EVM is simple, standard stack machine experience and patterns for code generation for microprocessors can be reused when porting higher level languages to the EVM.

### A Semantic Blockchain Procedural Language and Database – The HyperLedger Approach

In contrast to the EVM, HyperLedger does not provide stack machine or other low level virtual machine but instead provides a Byzantine Fault Tolerant ledger machine based on Liskov and Castros **[Liskov et al 1999]**  Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance (PBFT) algorithm. This machine can be accessed by external programs via a Web API making it easy to create complex real life solutions with embedded smart contracts and secure distributed ledgers.

Figure 3 - Simple Chain Code for Initilising a Ledger

The actual logic for smart contracts or other block chain ledger based functionality is implemented in what are called “Chain Code” modules. Chain code modules can be written in GO, a modern imperative language suitable for robust high performance systems applications. Chain code modules consist of standard GO code but utilize a small API that exposes.

The example chain code program in Figure 3 illustrates how Chain code combines GO and the HyperLegder API. There are two key blocks of statements in the Example in Figure 3. The first block is

account = args[0]

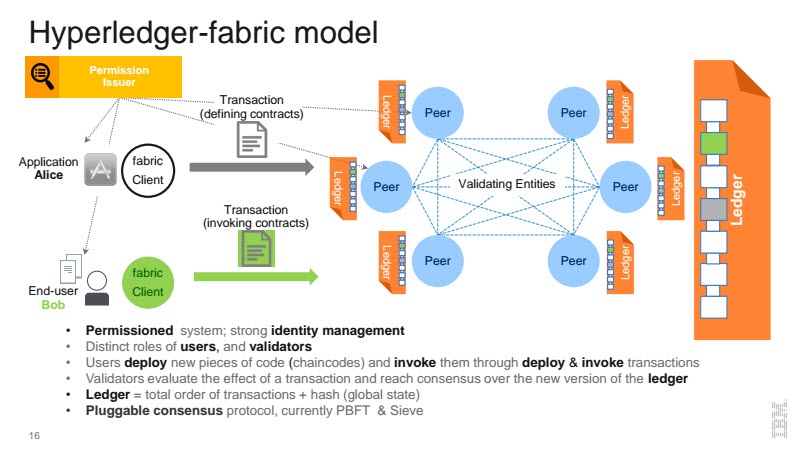
accountValue, err = strconv.Atoi(args[1])

This takes the name of the account to be updated from the first argument ( args[0] )of the call invoking this chain code procedure and stores it in the variable account. It then takes the initial balance for the account from the second argument ( args[1] )of the call and stores it in the variable accountValue.

|  |
| --- |
| The second key block is then using the cahin code API  // Write the state to the ledger |
| err = stub.PutState(account, []byte(strconv.Itoa(accountValue))) |

|  |
| --- |
| func (t \*CrowdFundChaincode) Init(stub shim.ChaincodeStubInterface, function string, args []string) ([]byte, error) { |
|  | // State variable "account" |
|  | var account string |
|  | // The value stored inside the state variable "account" |
|  | var accountValue int |
|  | // Any error to be reported back to the client |
|  | var err error |
|  |  |
|  | if len(args) != 2 { |
|  | return nil, errors.New("Incorrect number of arguments. Expecting 2.") |
|  | } |
|  |  |
|  | // Initialize the state variable name |
|  | account = args[0] |
|  | // Initialize the state variable value |
|  | accountValue, err = strconv.Atoi(args[1]) |
|  | if err != nil { |
|  | return nil, errors.New("Expecting integer value for account initialization.") |
|  | } |
|  |  |
|  | fmt.Printf("accountValue = %d\n", accountValue) |
|  |  |
|  | // Write the state to the ledger |
|  | err = stub.PutState(account, []byte(strconv.Itoa(accountValue))) |
|  | if err != nil { |
|  | return nil, err |
|  | } |
|  |  |
|  | return nil, nil |
|  | } |

Figure 4 - Hyperledger Structure **from [BlockGeeks01]**



### Problems with Procedural Semantics

## Semantic Blockchain with Declarative Semantics

### 3.1 Alternatives for declarative Computing

### Injecting Semantics Directly into Blockchain Computation

### Putting it all together - The Huuzlee Approach

I love this

## A Sampler of Semantic Challenges and their solution

### 4.1 Constructing Ontologies with Known Characteristics with Upper Ontologies

### 4.2 Ontology Translation using upper ontologies

## 5. Applications in the capital markets and Financial services

Financial services have been going through its digital transformation, all the way from upgrading legacy systems to creating new peer to peer mechanisms; moving to microservices and building cognitive capabilities. Introducing more instruments, more market models, products, automation and intelligence.

Trends:

Automating and embedding regulations in workflows and eventually regulators being part of the networks for supervision as well as utility services

Foundational work: data lakes, cloud, microservices

More end to end, horizontal systems: risk, compliance, collateral layers, consolidated trading to post trade models (capital markets)

Applications which need to connect with each other

Extension to physical world data via IoT, e.g creation of new derivatives instruments.

Peer to peer systems, disintermediation, user empowerment

Ability for owners of the data to monetize their data will be more and more important -> CONNECTION WITH HUZLEE?

Ontologies-> reference to FIBO work

Reference to the regulatory reporting PoCs -> <http://www.waterstechnology.com/waters/feature/2459451/fibo-marches-forward-a-look-inside-state-streets-fibo-proof-of-concept>

<http://blockchain.cs.ucl.ac.uk/barac-project/>

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317492448\_CHANGING\_BANKING\_LANDSCAPE\_THE\_PSD2

Complexity of mapping all semantic content; manual, needs domain knowledge, constantly changing and needs agreement between different parties within and across organizations – need to use cognitive computing and needs to be self sustaining -> HOW TO ADDRESS THIS?

## 6. Applications in Other Industries

## 7. Summary

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