Rectifying Administrated ERC20 Tokens

23rd International Conference on Information and Communications Security (ICICS '21)

Nikolay Ivanov, Hanqing Guo, Qiben Yan

Department of Computer Science and Engineering Secure and Intelligent Things Lab (SEIT Lab) Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA





Outline

- Introduction
- 2 Administrated Patterns
- SafelyAdministrated
- Conclusion

Outline

- Introduction
- 2 Administrated Patterns
- 3 Evaluation
- SafelyAdministrated
- 6 Conclusion

The person who deploys a smart contract does not receive any privilege or ownership by default.

The person who deploys a smart contract does not receive any privilege or ownership by default.

- Effectively Ungoverned Smart Contracts
 - on privileged user(s); OR
 - o no privileged power.

The person who deploys a smart contract does not receive any privilege or ownership by default.

- Effectively Ungoverned Smart Contracts
 - on privileged user(s); OR
 - no privileged power.

Example: Binance Token, Market Cap: \approx 48 billion (Jul 12, 2021)

The person who deploys a smart contract does not receive any privilege or ownership by default.

- Effectively Ungoverned Smart Contracts
 - on privileged user(s); OR
 - o no privileged power.

Example: Binance Token, Market Cap: \approx 48 billion (Jul 12, 2021)

- Administrated Smart Contracts
 - privileged user(s); AND
 - privileged power.

The person who deploys a smart contract does not receive any privilege or ownership by default.

- Effectively Ungoverned Smart Contracts
 - no privileged user(s); **OR**
 - no privileged power.

Example: Binance Token, Market Cap: \approx 48 billion (Jul 12, 2021)

- Administrated Smart Contracts
 - privileged user(s); AND
 - privileged power.

Example: TetherUSD, Market Cap: \approx 62 billion (Jul 12, 2021)

```
function issue(uint amount) public onlyOwner {
    require(_totalSupply + amount > _totalSupply);
    require(balances[owner] + amount > balances[owner]);

balances[owner] += amount;
    _totalSupply += amount;

Issue(amount);

}
```

The person who deploys a smart contract does not receive any privilege or ownership by default.

- Effectively Ungoverned Smart Contracts
 - no privileged user(s); OR
 - o no privileged power.

Example: Binance Token, Market Cap: \approx 48 billion (Jul 12, 2021)

- Administrated Smart Contracts
 - privileged user(s); AND
 - privileged power.

Example: TetherUSD, Market Cap: \approx 62 billion (Jul 12, 2021)

```
function issue(uint amount) public onlyOwner {
    require(_totalSupply + amount > _totalSupply);
    require(balances[owner] + amount > balances[owner]);

balances[owner] += amount;
    _totalSupply += amount;

Issue(amount);

}
```

The person who deploys a smart contract does not receive any privilege or ownership by default.

- Effectively Ungoverned Smart Contracts
 - no privileged user(s); **OR**
 - o no privileged power.

Example: Binance Token, Market Cap: \approx 48 billion (Jul 12, 2021)

- Administrated Smart Contracts
 - privileged user(s); AND
 - privileged power.

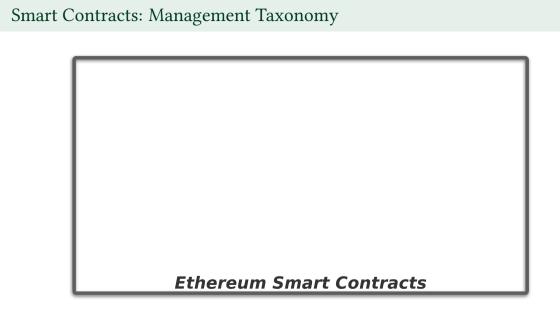
Example: TetherUSD, Market Cap: \approx 62 billion (Jul 12, 2021)

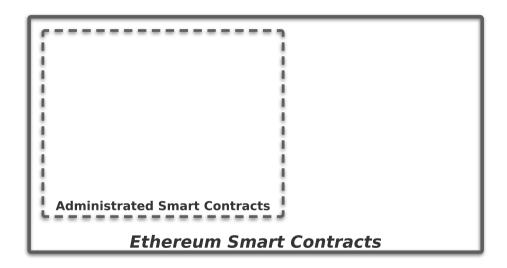
```
function issue(uint amount) public onlyOwner {
    require(_totalSupply + amount > _totalSupply);
    require(balances[owner] + amount > balances[owner]);

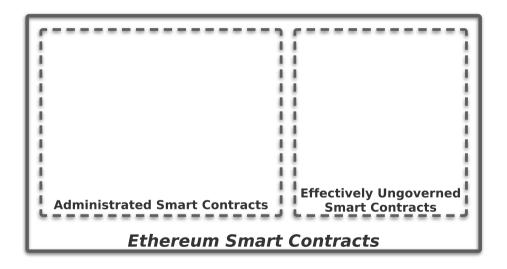
balances[owner] += amount;
    __totalSupply += amount;

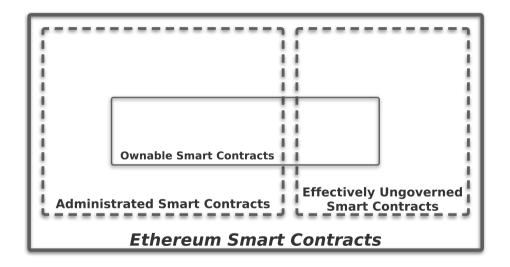
Issue(amount);

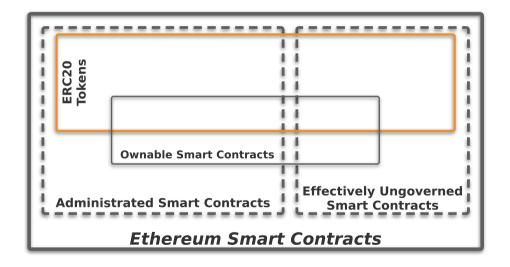
}
```

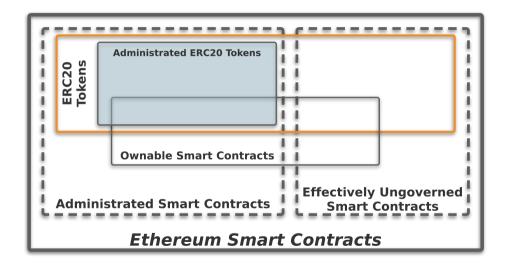


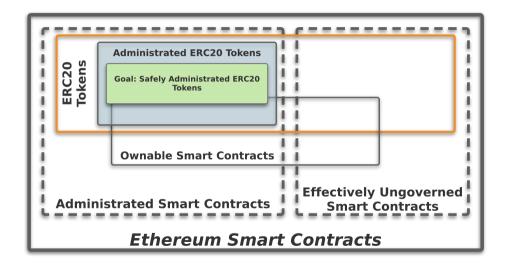












Traditional Financial Services

Administrated ERC20 Tokens

Traditional Financial Services

Banks, PayPal, VISA/MasterCard, etc.

Administrated ERC20 Tokens

Deployed on Ethereum Mainnet;

Traditional Financial Services

- Banks, PayPal, VISA/MasterCard, etc.
- Brick-and-mortar business;

Administrated ERC20 Tokens

- Deployed on Ethereum Mainnet;
- Can be created by anyone in minutes;

Traditional Financial Services

- Banks, PayPal, VISA/MasterCard, etc.
- Brick-and-mortar business;
- Licensing and strict regulation;

Administrated ERC20 Tokens

- Deployed on Ethereum Mainnet;
- Can be created by anyone in minutes;
- Loose or no regulation;

Traditional Financial Services

- Banks, PayPal, VISA/MasterCard, etc.
- Brick-and-mortar business:
- Licensing and strict regulation;
- Corporate government with checks and balances;

Administrated ERC20 Tokens

- Deployed on Ethereum Mainnet;
- Can be created by anyone in minutes;
- Loose or no regulation;
- Security and power hinges on a single private key;

Traditional Financial Services

- Banks, PayPal, VISA/MasterCard, etc.
- Brick-and-mortar business;
- Licensing and strict regulation;
- Corporate government with checks and balances;
- Any abuse of power is localized and hard to conduct;

Administrated ERC20 Tokens

- Deployed on Ethereum Mainnet;
- Can be created by anyone in minutes;
- Loose or no regulation;
- Security and power hinges on a single private key;
- The administrator can take all the money in minutes;

Traditional Financial Services

- Banks, PayPal, VISA/MasterCard, etc.
- Brick-and-mortar business;
- Licensing and strict regulation;
- Corporate government with checks and balances;
- Any abuse of power is localized and hard to conduct;
- Attacks are local, limited in scope, and can be remediated.

Administrated ERC20 Tokens

- Deployed on Ethereum Mainnet;
- Can be created by anyone in minutes;
- Loose or no regulation;
- Security and power hinges on a single private key;
- The administrator can take all the money in minutes;
- An attacker only needs to steal a 64-byte secret to steal all the money. No remediation possible.

Traditional Financial Services

- Banks, PayPal, VISA/MasterCard, etc.
- Brick-and-mortar business:
- Licensing and strict regulation;
- Corporate government with checks and balances;
- Any abuse of power is localized and hard to conduct;
- Attacks are local, limited in scope, and can be remediated.

Administrated ERC20 Tokens

- Deployed on Ethereum Mainnet;
- Can be created by anyone in minutes;
- Loose or no regulation;
- Security and power hinges on a single private key;
- The administrator can take all the money in minutes;
- An attacker only needs to steal a 64-byte secret to steal all the money. No remediation possible.

Administrated ERC20 tokens are less safe than the traditional services they are designed to disrupt!

Outline

- Introduction
- 2 Administrated Patterns
- 3 Evaluation
- SafelyAdministrated
- Conclusion

```
1 function kill() public onlyAdmin {
2 | selfdestruct(payable(msg.sender));
3 }
```

```
1 function kill() public onlyAdmin {
2 | selfdestruct(payable(msg.sender));
3 }
```

```
1 function kill() public onlyAdmin {
2 | selfdestruct(payable(msg.sender));
3 }
```

```
1 function kill() public onlyAdmin {
2 | selfdestruct(payable(msg.sender));
3 }
```

```
1 // deprecate current contract in favour of a new one
2 function deprecate(address _upgradedAddress) public onlyOwner {
3    deprecated = true;
4    upgradedAddress = _upgradedAddress;
5    Deprecate(_upgradedAddress);
6 }
```

```
1 // deprecate current contract in favour of a new one
2 function deprecate(address _upgradedAddress) public onlyOwner {
3    deprecated = true;
4    upgradedAddress = _upgradedAddress;
5    Deprecate(_upgradedAddress);
6 }
```

```
1 // deprecate current contract in favour of a new one
2 function deprecate(address _upgradedAddress) public onlyOwner {
3     deprecated = true;
4     upgradedAddress = _upgradedAddress;
5     Deprecate(_upgradedAddress);
6 }
```

```
1 // deprecate current contract in favour of a new one
2 function deprecate(address _upgradedAddress) public onlyOwner {
3    deprecated = true;
4    upgradedAddress = _upgradedAddress;
5    Deprecate(_upgradedAddress);
6 }
```

Change of Address

```
1 function setFee(address to) public onlyOwner{
2 | fee = to;
3 }
```

Change of Address

```
1 function setFee(address to) public onlyOwner{
2 | fee = to;
3 }
```

Change of Address

```
1 function setFee(address to) public onlyOwner{
2 | fee = to;
3 }
```

Change of Address

```
1 function setFee(address to) public onlyOwner{
2 | fee = to;
3 }
```

Fee address replacement is easily exploitable:

Ivanov et al. "Targeting the Weakest Link: Social Engineering Attacks in Ethereum Smart Contracts", Asia CCS 2021

Minting / Burning

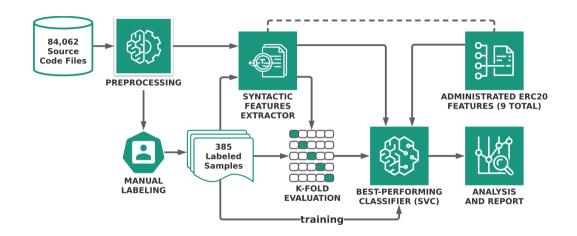
Minting / Burning

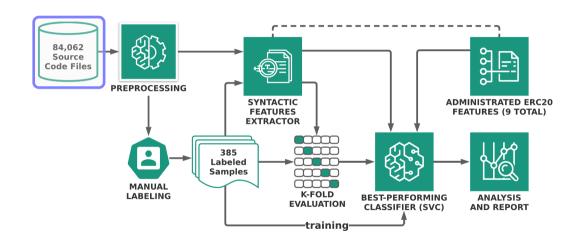
Minting / Burning

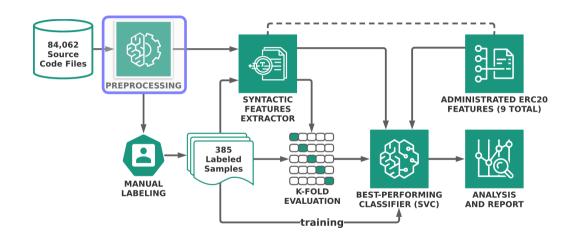
```
function mint(address account, uint amount) public onlyOwner {
  mint(account, amount);
function burn(address account, uint amount) public onlyOwner {
  burn(account, amount);
```

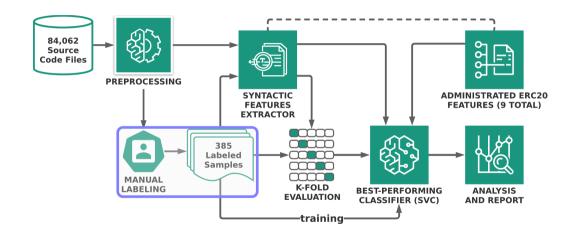
Outline

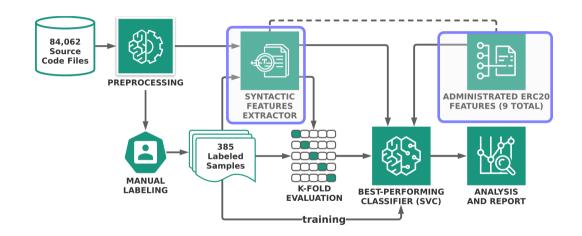
- Introduction
- 2 Administrated Patterns
- 3 Evaluation
- SafelyAdministrated
- 6 Conclusion

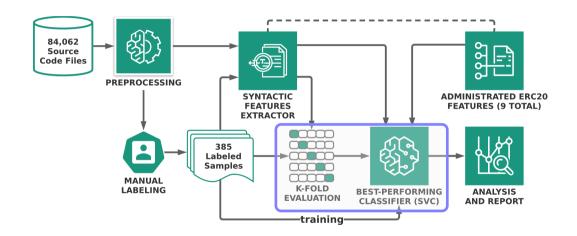


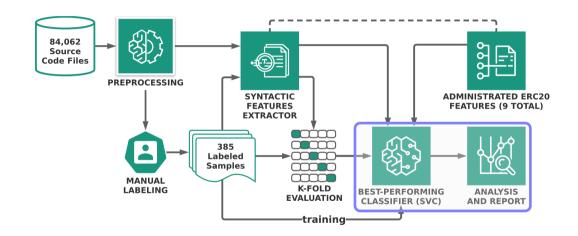




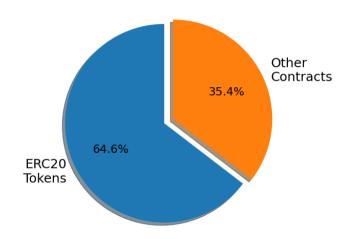




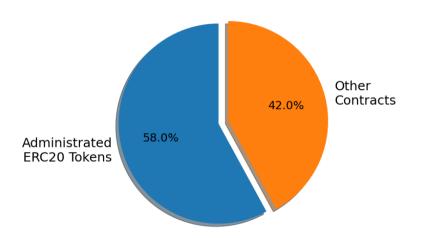




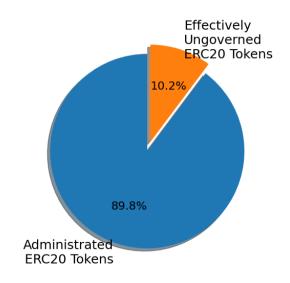
ERC20 Tokens vs Other Contracts



Percentage of Administrated ERC20 Tokens



Percentage of Administrated ERC20 Tokens — Cont'd



Outline

- Introduction
- 2 Administrated Patterns
- 3 Evaluation
- SafelyAdministrated
- 6 Conclusion

Should we boycott or ban administrated tokens?

• Administration \neq evil.

- Administration \neq evil.
- Swimming against the tide is counterproductive.

- Administration \neq evil.
- Swimming against the tide is counterproductive.
- Administrating patterns can be safe!

- Administration \neq evil.
- Swimming against the tide is counterproductive.
- Administrating patterns can be safe!



- Administration \neq evil.
- Swimming against the tide is counterproductive.
- Administrating patterns can be safe!





Deferred Maintenance

- Administration \neq evil.
- Swimming against the tide is counterproductive.
- Administrating patterns can be safe!





Deferred Maintenance



Quorum of Trustees

Should we boycott or ban administrated tokens?

- Administration \neq evil.
- Swimming against the tide is counterproductive.
- Administrating patterns can be safe!

SAFELY ADMINISTRATED



Deferred Maintenance



Quorum of Trustees



Safe Pause

Deferred Maintenance



• Announce maintenance procedure in advance;

Deferred Maintenance



- Announce maintenance procedure in advance;
- Postpone the execution of the maintenance procedure;

Deferred Maintenance



- Announce maintenance procedure in advance;
- Postpone the execution of the maintenance procedure;
- If users disagree, they can safely quit the contract before the arrival of the maintenance timestamp.



• Similar to an organization's board of trustees;



- Similar to an organization's board of trustees;
- Split the authority between multiple people or organizations;



- Similar to an organization's board of trustees;
- Split the authority between multiple people or organizations;
- The quorum of trustees votes for each maintenance procedure;



- Similar to an organization's board of trustees;
- Split the authority between multiple people or organizations;
- The quorum of trustees votes for each maintenance procedure;
- If one or a few members' private keys are compromised, the contract remains safe.



• The pause functionality is important in ERC20 tokens;



- The pause functionality is important in ERC20 tokens;
- State-of-the-art Pausable OpenZeppelin interface allows to freeze the smart contract forever;



- The pause functionality is important in ERC20 tokens;
- State-of-the-art Pausable OpenZeppelin interface allows to freeze the smart contract forever;
- Any trustee can trigger a Safe Pause effective immediately.



- The pause functionality is important in ERC20 tokens;
- State-of-the-art Pausable OpenZeppelin interface allows to freeze the smart contract forever;
- Any trustee can trigger a Safe Pause effective immediately.
- Safe Pause puts a deadline on the pause to allow the trustees to address the issue;



- The pause functionality is important in ERC20 tokens;
- State-of-the-art Pausable OpenZeppelin interface allows to freeze the smart contract forever;
- Any trustee can trigger a Safe Pause effective immediately.
- Safe Pause puts a deadline on the pause to allow the trustees to address the issue;
- Two back-to-back pauses are prohibited.

Outline

- Introduction
- 2 Administrated Patterns
- 3 Evaluation
- SafelyAdministrated
- 6 Conclusion

• Most administrated ERC20 Tokens are potentially unsafe.

- Most administrated ERC20 Tokens are potentially unsafe.
- The vast majority of ERC20 tokens are administrated, with billions of dollars are in danger.

- Most administrated ERC20 Tokens are potentially unsafe.
- The vast majority of ERC20 tokens are administrated, with billions of dollars are in danger.
- SafelyAdministrated: make ERC20 tokens safe without boycotting administrating patterns;

- Most administrated ERC20 Tokens are potentially unsafe.
- The vast majority of ERC20 tokens are administrated, with billions of dollars are in danger.
- SafelyAdministrated: make ERC20 tokens safe without boycotting administrating patterns;
- Future work: Automated translation of unsafely administrated ERC20 tokens into the safely administrated ones.

- Most administrated ERC20 Tokens are potentially unsafe.
- The vast majority of ERC20 tokens are administrated, with billions of dollars are in danger.
- SafelyAdministrated: make ERC20 tokens safe without boycotting administrating patterns;
- Future work: Automated translation of unsafely administrated ERC20 tokens into the safely administrated ones.



https://seit.egr.msu.edu/