

A Blockchain Consensus Protocol With Horizontal Scalability

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Abstract

Blockchain systems have the potential to decentralise many traditionally centralised systems. However, scalability remains a key challenge. Without a horizontally scalable solution, blockchain systems remain unsuitable for ubiquitous use. We design a novel blockchain system called CHECO. Each node in our system maintains individual hash chains, which only stores transactions that the node is involved in. A consensus is reached on special blocks called checkpoint blocks rather than on all the transactions. Checkpoint blocks are effectively a hash pointer to the individual hash chains, thus a single checkpoint block may represent a large set of transaction blocks. The consensus protocol does not imply transaction validity. Hence we include a validation protocol which allows nodes to verify that transactions are correctly recorded, which indirectly achieves consensus on transactions. We implement a prototype and evaluate it experimentally. Our results show a strong indication of horizontal scalability even in the worst case, where every transaction is made with a randomly selected node.

Preface

Since early 2013, the time when I mined my first Bitcoin, I have been interested in decentralising the traditionally centralised systems. Following the Snowden revelations, the interest became a desire that has stayed with me ever since. Today, many blockchain systems are mature, but still not yet ready for ubiquitous use due to the scalability limitation. Many of us still do not use Bitcoin to purchase everyday goods, online or offline. This limitation, as well as my personal ambitions, led me to this thesis, with the goal of creating a truly horizontally scalable solution.

There are a number of people who have supported me in this endeavour who I would like to thank. My supervisor Dr. Johan Pouwelse, your unrivalled enthusiasm and guidance have kept me motivated and productive. Dr. Zhijie Ren, this work would not have been possible without your invaluable input and the numerous discussions which we have had. Members of the Tribler team—Martijn de Vos, Quinten Stokkink and Chengxin Ma, you have my gratitude for helping me with the implementation and proofreading my work. Members of the Cyber Security group—Dr. Zekeriya Erkin and Oğuzhan Ersoy, I thank both of you for your feedback on my presentations.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

We live in a world where technologies have become vital for our welfare and success. The internet, for instance, gave us the ability of efficiently exchange information on a global scale. However, in contrast to its original design, the internet and in particular the world wide web is becoming increasingly centralised. The domain name system (root name server), certificate authorities (root CA), to name a few, carry enormous responsibilities and are a central point of failure. The same can be said for many other services such as online marketplaces, cloud services and even our banking system. The 2008 financial crisis is an example of the banking system making poor choices which resulted in a decline in consumer wealth in the order of trillions [1] and led to the European debt crisis.

Ironically, during the midst of the financial crisis, Satoshi Nakamoto published the Bitcoin whitepaper [2]. Which, for the first time, gave us a simple banking system in the form of a distributed ledger, also known as blockchain. It needs no central control but still incorruptible with high probability even if there are malicious parties that aim to undermine the system.

The primary innovation is the consensus mechanism which prevents double spending but also incentivises anyone (with adequate hardware) to participate and keep the network running. The double spending problem can be seen as an inconsistency issue. For example, C has 5 units of currency in her account. If C can simultaneously claim that she transferred 5 units to A but also 5 units to B , then the system is inconsistent. Bitcoin and many of its derivatives (e.g. Litecoin¹ and Dogecoin²) solve the inconsistency problem with a consensus algorithm. The goal of the algorithm is to reach agreement on a set of valid transactions. This effectively eliminates inconsistencies.

In Bitcoin's case, the consensus algorithm is called *proof-of-work*. Where miners (parties that run the Bitcoin network) collect transactions and compete in solving a puzzle. The puzzle is easy to verify but difficult to solve. Only the miner that solves it can generate a valid block containing all the collected transactions. The

¹<https://litecoin.org>

²<http://dogecoin.org>

miner is also rewarded with new coins and transaction fees. It is important to note that every block depends on the previous block. Hence the name blockchain. This property ensures malicious nodes cannot easily rewrite history if they do not have a majority of the network's computing power. Consequently, it is unlikely for more than one blockchain to exist in the network for a long period of time. Thus every party sees a consistent blockchain which solves the double spending problem.

Bitcoin has had its ups and downs, but overall it has grown into an enormous system. Its power consumption is as high as Republic of Ireland [3]. Its market capitalisation, at the time of writing, is over 60 billion USD and growing (see Figure 1.1). Many online marketplaces are using Bitcoin. For example, Steam³ and



Figure 1.1: Market capitalisation and price of Bitcoin, graph is extracted from [4].

Amazon⁴. Due to its success, people from many different disciplines began investigating in ways to use blockchain technology. This includes finance [5], health care [6], logistics [7] and energy [8].

Sadly, as traditional blockchain systems began to gain popularity, their limitations also became apparent. Bitcoin has the infamous 7 transactions per second upper bound [9], which is due to the fact that blocks are fixed to 1 MB and are only generated on average every 10 minutes. Since every Bitcoin transaction is at least 250 bytes, it computes to about 7 transactions per second. Due to this limitation, it is not uncommon to see a long backlog of about 20,000 transactions⁵. A few months ago the backlog even reached 100,000, which meant new transactions would take at least 11 hours to be written to the blockchain [10]. This issue has

³<https://store.steampowered.com/>

⁴Not directly, but via <https://purse.io/>.

⁵<https://blockchain.info/unconfirmed-transactions/>

plagued the Bitcoin community for some time and is the root cause for the block size debate, which some call a civil war [11]. Parties that are for the increase in block size argue that a larger block would improve the transaction rate. Parties against it argue that it would make mining more centralised because blocks take longer to propagate through the network. It also requires a hard (non-backwards compatible) fork, which risks consensus failure and devaluation. A recent empirical study by Croman et al. [12] has shown that increasing the block size or the block interval may help. But given the bandwidth and latency constraints of today’s network, it is not possible to have more than 27 transactions per second. To achieve transaction rates higher than that, it will lead to unfairness for nodes that do not have a good network connection. Thus fundamental changes are necessary to run at the scale of centralised payment processors such as Visa, which is in the order of tens of thousands transactions per second [13].

The Bitcoin community understands the issue and many proposals exist with the aim to make Bitcoin more scalable. The most prominent one is Segregated Witness or SegWit [14]. It moves the signature data to the end of the block and uses a variable block size up to 4 MB. The effect is that the first 1 MB of the block is still backwards compatible, thus there is no need for a hard fork. It also solves the transaction malleability problem [15] which paves the way for off-chain transactions via Lightning Network [16]. However, some fear SegWit is not enough and wish to see a hard fork that uses “Adjustable Blocksize Cap” that increase the maximum block size even further to 8 MB [17]. The ongoing civil war resulted in a Bitcoin fork, called Bitcoin Cash [18]. At the time of writing, it is too early to speculate how these proposals and forks may affect the scalability properties of Bitcoin. But the conclusion that we can draw from the scalability debate is that the Bitcoin design is fundamentally not scalable, and it is highly non-trivial to “patch” the problem.

1.1 Contributions

In this work, we take the advice of Croman et al. [12] and Vukolić [9] and rethink the blockchain architecture. Our primary insight came from observing the differences between how value transfer work in the real world and how they work in early blockchain systems. Take a restaurant owner, for example, most of the time the customer is honest and pays the bill. There is no need for the customer or the owner to report the transaction to any central authority because both parties are happy with the transaction. On the other hand, if the customer leaves without paying the bill, then the owner would report the incident to some central authority, e.g. the police. On the contrary, in blockchain systems, every transaction is effectively sent to the miners, which can be seen as a collective authority. This consequently leads to limited scalability because every transaction must be validated by the authority even when most of the transactions are legitimate.

Using the aforementioned insight, we explore an alternative consensus model

for blockchain systems where transactions themselves do not reach consensus, but nevertheless verifiable at a later stage by any node in the network. We call our protocol CHECO, derived from *checkpoint consensus*. Informally, our system works as follows. Every node stores its own blockchain and every block is one transaction. We randomly select nodes in every round, the selected ones are called facilitators. Facilitators reach consensus not on the individual transactions, but on the state of every chain represented by a single digest, called a checkpoint block. If a checkpoint block of some node is in consensus, then that node can prove to any other node that it holds a set of transactions that compute (form a chain) to the checkpoint block. This immediately shows that those transactions are tamper-proof. The key difference from related work is the independence of the transaction validation phase. Prior systems such as Bitcoin and Ethereum entangled the consensus algorithm with the transaction validation, restricting performance. By splitting this functionality we achieved horizontal scalability in the general case. That is, by adding new nodes into the network, the global transaction rate should increase proportionally, regardless of the choice of system parameters.

Our main contributions are the following.

- We formally introduce a blockchain system—CHECO. It uses individual hash chains and checkpoints on every node to achieve horizontally scalable in the general case for the first time.
- We formally analyse CHECO to ensure correctness as defined in our architecture.
- We provide an implementation and then experiment with up to 1200 nodes, our results show strong evidence of horizontal scalability.

1.2 Document structure

We begin with the problem description in Chapter 2, it first describes the state-of-the-art in scalable blockchain systems and their shortcomings, which leads to our research question. In Chapter 3 we give a formal description of our system model and architecture. Next, we analyse the correctness and performance of our design in Chapter 4, this is where we present our key theorems. Implementation and experimental results are discussed in Chapter 5. Finally, we conclude in Chapter 6 and discuss future work.

Chapter 2

Problem description

From the Introduction, we saw that early blockchain systems face a scalability problem. In particular, the use proof-of-work is unlikely to reach a transaction rate suitable for ubiquitous use. Many attempts to fix the scalability problem exist in academia as well as the industry. In this chapter, we describe the related work in the form of a mini taxonomy and identify areas for improvement and limitations. Then we state our research question which aims to overcome some of the limitations.

2.1 Related work and mini taxonomy

Blockchain research has seen a surge in recent years from both the industry and academia, this resulted in a myriad of blockchain systems with different approaches to scalability. To understand the current state-of-the-art, we classify various blockchain systems by their scalability approach.

2.1.1 Early blockchain systems

This category represents the baseline, which are systems with a probabilistic consensus algorithm. That is, transactions never reach consensus with a probability of 1. Given sufficient computational power, adversaries are able to undo any transaction. The typical examples are proof-of-work based systems such as Bitcoin, Ethereum and other Altcoins. In Bitcoin, nodes compete in solving puzzles. The first node solves the puzzle has the privilege to create a new block. The level of consensus of a block containing many transactions is determined by how deep it is in the Bitcoin blockchain, also called the number of confirmation. The probability of a block being orphaned drops exponentially as the depth increases [2]. Nevertheless, the probability of the highest block being orphaned is non-negligible.

The advantage of this approach is that it can be used in a large network. In fact, prior to Bitcoin, there was no internet-scale consensus protocol. Bitcoin is also fault-tolerant because attackers can not out pace honest users in finding new blocks unless they have a majority of the hash power. As long as the majority is honest

and reasonable measures are taken to prevent the selfish mining attack [19]. The disadvantage, however, is that transactions are never in consensus with a probability of 1—no consensus finality. Hence double spending is possible for transactions that do not have a large number of confirmations. Furthermore, as we mentioned in the Chapter 1, the performance is limited due to the fact that blocks are of fixed size and are generated at fixed intervals. Thus early blockchain systems do not achieve horizontal scalability.

2.1.2 Off-chain transactions and payment networks

Off-chain transactions make use of the following fact. If nodes make frequent transactions, then it is not necessary to store every transaction on the blockchain, only the net settlement is necessary. The best examples are Lightning Network [16] and Duplex Micropayment Channels [20].

Off-chain transaction systems are implemented using multi-signature addresses [21] and hashed time-locked Bitcoin contracts [22]. In the simplest case, if two parties wish to make transactions, they open a payment channel in the form of a multi-signature Bitcoin address (for two parties it would be a 2-of-2 signature address). Each of the party must also deposit some Bitcoins in the multi-signature address, this is called the opening transaction. Both parties keep the channel state which is not broadcasted to the network. The state is updated when the two parties make new transactions. The protocol disincentivises the parties from broadcasting old channel states. If this occurs, the counterparty can drain all the Bitcoins in the channel. To close the channel, the parties simply broadcast the latest net settlement to the Bitcoin network, this is called the closing transaction. Effectively, only two transactions need to be broadcasted to the Bitcoin network—the opening and the closing transaction, even if the two parties made thousands or millions of transactions in between. The two-party scheme can be extended to a network of channels, which allows two parties to make off-chain transactions without an open channel as long as they are connected by nodes that do.

The advantage of such systems is that they act as add-ons to Bitcoin which already has a large number of users. Thus, if enough of the network wish for it (by setting a new block version), then a large number of users will instantly benefit from it. Some implementations already exist¹, but at the time of writing SegWit is not activated yet which is a prerequisite for Lightning Network.

On the other hand, payment channel complicates user experience and leads to centralisation. As we mentioned earlier, each node must deposit some Bitcoins into a multi-signature account. The users must pick a suitable amount. If the deposit is too low it would not allow large transactions. If the deposit is too high the user is locked out of much of its Bitcoins for use outside of the channel. In addition, the user must proactively check whether the counterparty has broadcasted an old channel state so that the user does not lose Bitcoins. Furthermore, creating

¹For example <https://github.com/lightningnetwork/lnd>.

channels with sufficient balance and also keeping it online to act as a router is expensive. A casual user is not capable of such tasks, thus it leads to centralisation. Payment channels, in theory, solve the scalability problem of early blockchain systems, but to the best of our knowledge, its exact scalability characteristics are not investigated.

2.1.3 Permissioned systems based on Byzantine consensus

This category of systems uses traditional Byzantine consensus algorithms such as PBFT [23]. In essence, they contain a fixed set of nodes (sometimes called validating peer) that run a Byzantine consensus algorithm to decide on new blocks. This technique is often used in permissioned system where the validators must be predetermined. For example, Hyperledger Fabric [24].

A nice aspect of Byzantine consensus and in particular PBFT is that it can handle much more transactions than classical blockchain systems. PBFT can, for example, achieve 10,000 TX/s if the number of validating peer is under 16 [25, Section 5.2]. Further, in contrast to proof-of-work, PBFT consensus is final. That is, transaction history cannot be re-written if it is already in the blockchain.

The major drawback of Byzantine consensus based systems is that it does not scale in terms of the number of validating peers. Going back to PBFT, its transaction rate drops to under 5000 TX/s when the number of validating peer is 64 [25, Section 5.2]. Moreover, the validating peers are predetermined which makes the system unsuitable for the open internet.

2.1.4 Combining proof-of-work with Byzantine consensus

Recent research has developed a class of hybrid systems which uses PoW for committee election, and Byzantine consensus algorithms to agree on transactions. This design is primarily for permissionless system because the PoW leader election aspect prevents Sybils. Some examples are SCP [26], ByzCoin [27] and Solidus [28].

This technique overcomes the early blockchain scalability issue by delegating the transaction validation to the Byzantine consensus protocol (e.g. PBFT in ByzCoin [27]). A major tradeoff of such systems is that they cannot guarantee correctness when there is a large number of malicious nodes (but less than a majority). For SCP, ByzCoin and Solidus, they all have some probability to elect more than t Byzantine nodes into the committee, where t is typically just under a third of the committee size (a lower bound of Byzantine consensus [29]). This problem is especially difficult to solve because the committee is always much smaller than the population size which has more than t Byzantine nodes. Classical blockchain does not have this problem because they do not use Byzantine consensus. Further, due to the fact that these systems must reach consensus on all transactions, none of them achieves horizontal scalability.

2.1.5 Sharding

Sharding is a technique to achieve horizontal scalability by grouping nodes into multiple committees or shards. Nodes within a single shard run a Byzantine consensus algorithm to agree on a set of transactions that belong to that specific shard. An intra-shard protocol is needed for transactions that involve nodes from more than one shard. The number of shards grows linearly with respect to the total computational power in the network. This scheme achieves horizontal scalability because if every shard commits transactions at the same throughput, then adding more shard would naturally result in a linear increase of global throughput. Examples of blockchain systems that use sharding are Elastico [30] and OmniLedger [31].

The biggest limitation of sharding is that it is only optimal if transactions stay in the same shard. In fact, Elastico cannot atomically process inter-shard transactions. OmniLedger has an inter-shard transaction protocol but choosing a good shard size is difficult. A large shard size would make the system less scalable because the Byzantine consensus algorithm must be run by a large number of nodes. A small shard size would result in a large number of inter-shard transactions which also hinder scalability. The authors of OmniLedger noted that inter-shard transactions have significantly higher latency compared to the consensus protocol [31]. Furthermore, since no shards can be compromised for the system to function correctly, the adversaries have more opportunities to compromise the system.

2.1.6 Blockchain without global consensus

Tangle [32], Corda [33] and the original TrustChain [34] do not use global consensus at all. In this scheme, every node has their own chain. Transactions between nodes are recorded on their respective chains. This effectively results in a directed acyclic graph. By avoiding global consensus, this approach achieves extremely desirable scalability properties similar to BitTorrent [35].

On the other hand, the application and security are limited. A malicious node can easily lie to other nodes regarding its own chain by simply presenting one version of reality to a set of nodes and another version to a different set. Thus the network will have a conflicting view on the state of the malicious node. Applications such as digital cash can not be implemented on top of such systems because consistency is needed in solving the double spending problem.

2.2 Research question

We saw in Section 2.1 that the majority of the systems cannot achieve horizontal scalability. To the best of our knowledge, only two systems—Elastico [30] and OmniLedger [31]—has experimentally demonstrated horizontal scalability. However, these techniques rely on sharding, thus the performance highly depends on transaction characteristics and the shard size parameter because inter-shard transactions are slow. Furthermore, all the systems described in Section 2.1 are com-

plete blockchain systems designed for a concrete application. We wish to design a blockchain consensus protocol that can be used in many applications. For example, the accounting of detailed internet traffic in Tribler [34], [36] and decentralised market². Hence our research question is the following.

How can we design a blockchain consensus protocol that is fault-tolerant, horizontally scalable, and able to reach global consensus?

In order to make sense of our research question, we must first define *blockchain consensus protocol*. Typical blockchain systems are application specific. For example, the application in Bitcoin (any many of its derivatives) is digital cash, the application in Namecoin is domain name registration [37] and the application in Siacoin is cloud storage [38]. Underneath these applications lies the blockchain consensus protocol which has the goal of reaching consensus on transactions or state changes. In the case of Bitcoin, it is proof-of-work (PoW). It is not concerned with the structure of the transactions, it works by simply treating transactions as a blob of data and hashes them with the previous block. In this work, we focus on the blockchain consensus protocol rather than any specific application. Because it is the scalability bottleneck and is necessary for any blockchain based application.

In the remainder of this section, we expand on our research question and visit each of our requirements in detail. At the end of this section, we describe some issues that we do not consider as a part of our design, which is the result of not focusing on any specific application.

Global consensus

Having consensus is essential in blockchain systems. It stops many types of malicious activities because the agreed state, or a representation of it, must have the consent of the honest nodes in the network. We emphasise on the notion of a representation of the state because in contrary to traditional blockchains, it does not necessarily mean the set of all transactions that have ever happened. The state can be a small, but verifiable representation of all the transactions. As an extreme example, a single digest of the complete history can represent the state. It is even verifiable as long as there are nodes that store the history.

Fault-tolerance

Similar to many blockchain systems, our system should be unaffected in the presence of powerful adversaries. In particular, adversaries are Byzantine meaning that they can have arbitrary behaviour. Thus anything is possible from simply omitting messages to colluding with each other in order to undermine the whole system.

There is another aspect of fault tolerance that is transaction verifiability. All transactions must be eventually verifiable to maintain system integrity. Further, the

²https://github.com/Tribler/tribler/blob/devel/Tribler/community/tradechain/__init__.py

validation result must be consistent. For example, if two different honest nodes attempt to verify the same transaction, it cannot be the case that one node thinks that the transaction is valid but the other thinks it is invalid.

Horizontal scalability

To enable ubiquitous use, we demand horizontal scalability. That is, the global transaction rate should increase as more nodes join the network. BitTorrent [35] is an example of such a system, where peers interact with each other to exchange files without any global bottleneck.

Limitations

Since our consensus protocol is application neutral, it does not attempt to prevent the Sybil attack [39]. A good defence mechanism requires application specific information. For example, a social network based Sybil defence mechanisms use graph structure of real-world relationships [40]. Online marketplaces such as Amazon use the rating of buyer and sellers. On the other hand, our system also has no restrictions on the Sybil defence mechanism and applications built on top of our system can use the best mechanism for their purpose.

For the same reason, we do not explicitly consider spam or denial of service attacks. Without a concrete application, it is difficult to distinguish a super active user from an attacker.

Chapter 3

System architecture

Our system consists of three protocols—the consensus protocol, the transaction protocol and the validation protocol. It is based on our prior work on TrustChain [34], where every node independently interacts with each other via their own blockchain¹.

The goal of this chapter is to detail our system specification. We begin our discussion with an intuitive overview of the architecture in Section 3.1. Next, we give the formal description, starting with the model and assumptions in Section 3.2. Then, the three protocols which make up the complete system, namely consensus protocol (Section 3.4), transaction protocol (Section 3.5) and validation protocol (Section 3.6). Finally, we discuss a few variations of our main design and their respective tradeoffs in Section 3.7.

3.1 System overview

The architecture is visualised in Figure 3.1. It consists of one data structure—

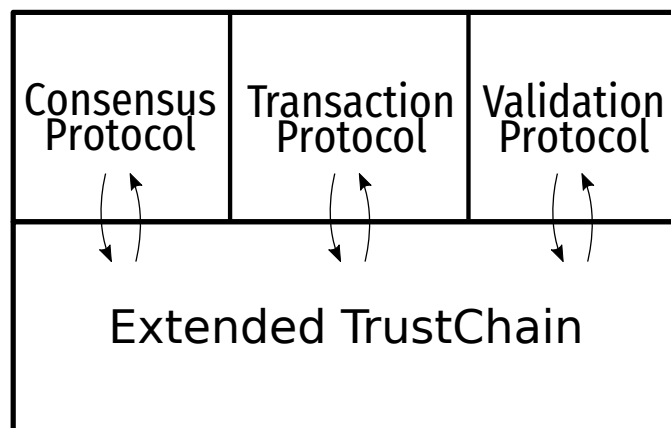


Figure 3.1: Overview of the system architecture

¹It is originally called MultiChain but the name has changed to TrustChain

Extended TrustChain, and three protocols. The protocols have distinct roles which are evident from their names. They run concurrently and do not interact with each other. The only synchronization happens on the Extended TrustChain layer, where all the protocols read and write from it. We first describe each component individually, starting with Extended TrustChain, and then explain how they fit together.

3.1.1 Extended TrustChain

Extended TrustChain naturally builds on top of the standard TrustChain. Thus we first describe the standard TrustChain. Our description has minor differences compared to the description in [34]. This is to help with the description of the extended TrustChain. We remark the difference when it occurs. However, the two descriptions are functionally the same.

Standard TrustChain

In TrustChain, every node has a “personal” chain. Initially, the chain only contains a genesis block generated by the nodes themselves. When a node A wishes to add a new transaction (TX) with B , a new TX block is generated for both A and B and is appended to their respective chains. The TX block must have a valid hash pointer pointing to the previous block and a reference² to its *pair* on B ’s chain. An example of is shown in Figure 3.2.

If every node follows the rules of TrustChain and we only consider hash pointers and not references, then every chain effectively forms a singly linked list. However, if a node violates the rules, then a *fork* may happen. That is, there may be more than one TX block with a hash pointer pointing back to the same block. In Figure 3.2, node b (in the middle chain) created two TX blocks that both point to $t_{b,5}$. If this is a ledger system it can be seen as a double spend, where the currency accumulated up until $t_{b,5}$ is spent twice.

Extended TrustChain

We are now ready to explain the Extended TrustChain. The primary difference is the introduction of a new type of block—checkpoint (CP) block. In contrast to TX blocks, CP blocks do not store transactions or contain references. Their purpose is to capture the state of the chain and the state of the whole system. In particular, the state of the chain is captured with a hash pointer. The state of the whole system is captured in the content of the CP block, namely as a digest of the latest *consensus result* which we explain in Section 3.1.2. A visual representation is shown in Figure 3.3.

²This is different from the original TrustChain definition found in [34]. In there, a TX block has two outgoing edges which are hash pointers to the two parties involved in the transaction. This work uses one outgoing edge and a reference.

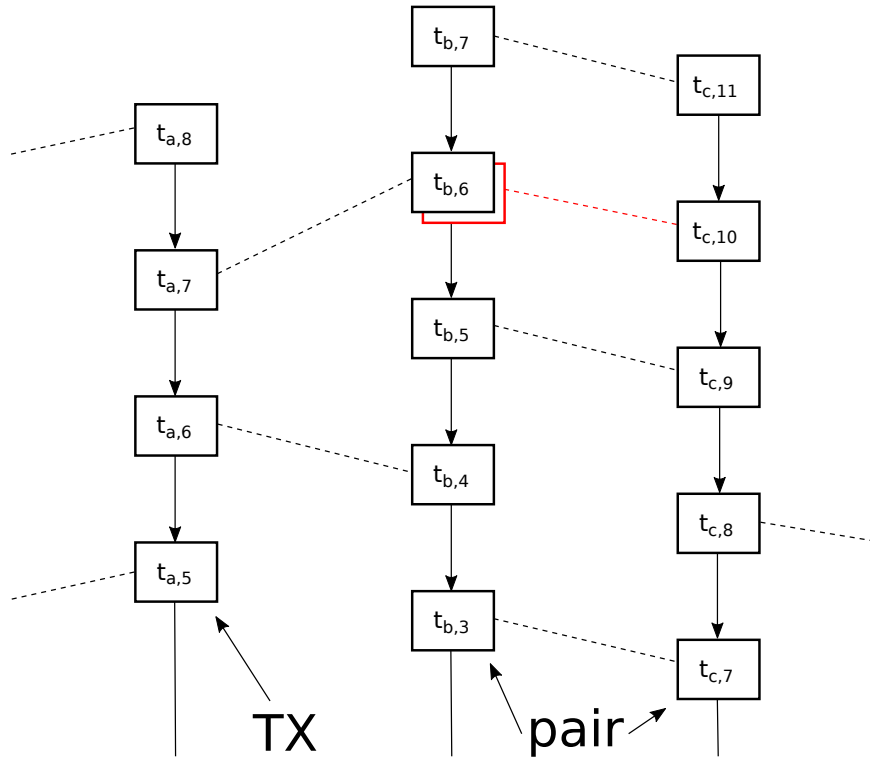


Figure 3.2: Every block is denoted by $t_{i,j}$, where i is the node ID and j is the sequence number of the block. Thus we have three nodes and three corresponding chains in this example. The arrows represent hash pointers and the dotted lines represent references. The blocks at the ends of one dotted line are pairs of each other. The red block after $t_{b,5}$ indicates a fork.

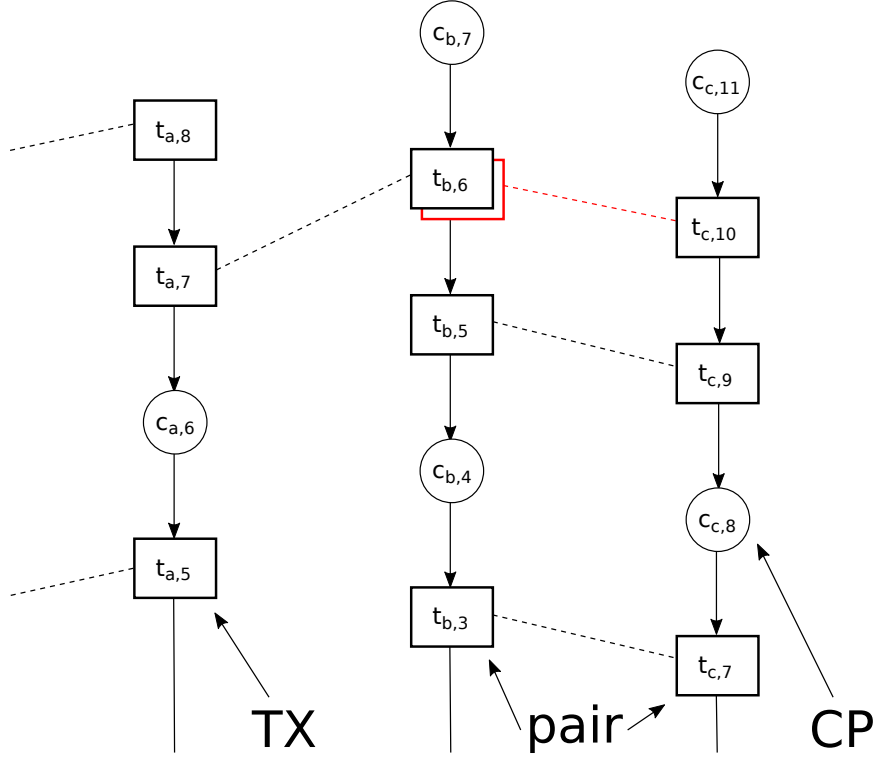


Figure 3.3: The circles represent CP blocks, they also have hash pointers (arrow) but do not have references (dotted line). Note that the sequence number counter do not change, it is shared with TX blocks.

From this point on, we use TrustChain to mean the Extended TrustChain unless explicitly clarified.

3.1.2 Consensus protocol

The consensus protocol can be seen as a technique of running infinitely many rounds of some Byzantine consensus algorithm³, starting a new execution immediately after the previous one is completed. This is necessary because blockchain systems always need to reach consensus on new values proposed by nodes in the system, or CP blocks in our case.

The high communication complexity of Byzantine consensus algorithms prohibits us from running it on a large network. Thus, for every round, we randomly select some node—called facilitators—to collect CP blocks from every other node and use them as the proposal. The facilitators are elected using a *luck value*, which is computed using $H(C_r || pk_u)$, where C_r is the consensus result (which can be seen as the set union of all the CP blocks collected by the facilitators) in round r and

³More accurately it is ACS or asynchronous subset consensus, we describe ACS in Section 3.4.1.

pk_u is the public key of node u . Intuitively, the election is guaranteed to be random because the output of a cryptographically secure hash function is unpredictable and C_r cannot be determined in advance. Finally, the elected facilitators run a Byzantine consensus algorithm to agree on a set of CP blocks. The next round begins when the new facilitators are computed from these CP blocks.

A visual explanation can be found in Appendix A, it walks through the steps needed for a node to be selected as a facilitator using an example.

3.1.3 Transaction and validation

The TX protocol is a simple request and response protocol. The nodes exchange one round of messages and create new TX blocks on their respective chains. Thus, as we mentioned before, one transaction should result in two TX blocks.

The consensus and transaction protocol by themselves do not provide a mechanism to detect tampering. Thus we need a validation protocol to counteract malicious behaviour. When a node wishes to validate one of its TX, it asks the counterparty for the *agreed fragment* of the TX. An agreed fragment of a TX block is a section of the chain beginning and ending with CP blocks that contain the TX block, the CP blocks must also be in consensus. Upon the counterparty's response, the node checks that the CP blocks are indeed in consensus, the hash pointers are valid and his TX is actually in the fragment. The TX is valid if these conditions are satisfied. Intuitively, this works because it is hard (because a cryptographically secure hash function is second-preimage resistant) to create a different chain that begins and ends with the same two CP blocks.

3.1.4 Combined protocol

The final result is essentially the concurrent composition of the three aforementioned protocols, all making use the Extended TrustChain data structure.

Our sub-protocol design gives us the highly desirable non-blocking property. In particular, we do not need to “freeze” the state of the chain for some communication to complete in order to create a block. For instance, a node may start the consensus protocol, and while it is running, create new transactions and validate old transactions. By the time the consensus protocol is done, the new CP block is added to whatever the state that the chain is in. It is not necessary to lock the chain while the consensus protocol is running and then unlock it afterwards.

3.2 Model and assumptions

This section and the ones following it give a technical treatment of what the content in System overview. For notational clarity, we use the following convention (adapted from [25]) for most of this work.

- Lower case (e.g. x) denotes a scalar object or a tuple.

- Upper case (e.g. X) denotes a set or a constant.
- Sans serif (e.g. $\text{fn}(\cdot)$) denotes a function.
- Monospace (e.g. `ack`) denotes message type.

Further, we use $a||b$ to denote concatenation of the binary representations of a and b .

We assume purely asynchronous channels with eventual delivery. Thus in no stage of our protocol do we make timing assumptions. The adversary has full control of the delivery schedule and the message ordering of all messages. But they are not allowed to drop messages except for their own⁴.

We assume there exists a Public Key Infrastructure (PKI), and nodes are identified by their unique and permanent public key. Finally, we use the random oracle (RO) model, i.e. calls to the random oracle are denoted by $H : \{0, 1\}^* \rightarrow \{0, 1\}^\lambda$, where $\{0, 1\}^*$ denotes the space of finite binary strings and λ is the security parameter. Under the RO model, the probability of successfully computing the inverse of the hash function is negligible with respect to λ [41].

In our model, we consider N nodes, which is the population size. n of them are facilitators, t out of n are malicious and the inequality $n \geq 3t + 1$ must hold. This is from the work of Pease, Shostak and Lamport, where they show a network of n nodes cannot reach Byzantine agreement with $t \geq n/3$ [29]. Further, the inequality $N \geq n + t$ must also hold. This is due to our system design, which becomes clear in Section 3.4.3.

Our threat model is as follows. We use a restricted version of the adaptive corruption model. The first restriction is that corrupted node can only change across rounds. That is, if a round has started, the corrupted nodes cannot change until the next round. The second restriction is that the adversary, presumably controlling all the corrupted nodes, is forgetful. Namely, the adversary may learn the internal state such as the private key of a corrupted node, but if the node recovers, then the adversary must forget the private key. This is realistic because otherwise the adversary can eventually learn all the private keys and sabotage the system.

3.3 Extended TrustChain

The primary data structure used in our system is the Extended TrustChain. Each node u has a public and private key pair— pk_u and sk_u , and a chain B_u . The chain consist of blocks $B_u = \{b_{u,i} : i \in \{0, \dots, h-1\}\}$, where $b_{u,i}$ is the i th block of u , and h is the height of the block (i.e. $h = |B_u|$). We often use $b_{u,h}$ to denote the latest block. There are two types of blocks, TX blocks and CP blocks. If T_u is the set of all TX blocks in B_u and C_u is the set of all CP blocks in B_u , then it must be the case that $T_u \cup C_u = B_u$ and $T_u \cap C_u = \emptyset$. The notation $b_{u,i}$ is generic over the

⁴ Reliability can be achieved in unreliable networks by resending messages or using some error correction code.

block type. We assume there exists a function $\text{typeof} : B_u \rightarrow \{\tau, \gamma\}$ that returns the type of the block, where τ represents the TX type and γ represents the CP type.

Definition 1. Transaction block

The TX block is a six-tuple, i.e

$$t_{u,i} = \langle H(b_{u,i-1}), seq_u, txid, pk_v, m, sig_u \rangle.$$

We describe each item in turn.

1. $H(b_{u,i-1})$ is the hash pointer to the previous block.
2. seq_u is the sequence number which should equal i .
3. $txid$ is the transaction identifier, it should be generated using a cryptographically secure pseudo-random number generator by the initiator of the transaction.
4. pk_v is the public key of the counterparty v .
5. m is the transaction message.
6. sig_u is the signature created using sk_u on the concatenation of the binary representation of the five items above.

The fact that we have no constraint on the content of m is in alignment with our design goal—application neutrality.

TX blocks come in pairs. In particular, for every block

$$t_{u,i} = \langle H(b_{u,i-1}), seq_u, txid, pk_v, m, sig_u \rangle$$

there exist one and only one pair

$$t_{v,j} = \langle H(b_{v,j-1}), seq_v, txid, pk_u, m, sig_v \rangle.$$

Note that the $txid$ and m are the same, and the public keys refer to each other. Thus, given a TX block, these properties allow us to identify its pair.

Definition 2. Checkpoint block

The CP block is a five-tuple, i.e.

$$c_{u,i} = \langle H(b_{u,i-1}), seq_u, H(C_r), r, sig_u \rangle,$$

where C_r is the consensus result (which we describe in Definition 3) in round r , the other items are the same as the TX block definition.

The genesis block in the chain must be a CP block in the form of

$$c_{u,0} = \langle H(\perp), 0, H(\perp), 0, sig_u \rangle,$$

where $H(\perp)$ can be interpreted as applying the hash function on an empty string. The genesis block is unique because every node has a unique public and private key pair.

Definition 3. Consensus result

Our consensus protocol runs in rounds as discussed in Section 3.1. Every round is identified by a round number r , which is incremented on every new round. The consensus result is a tuple, i.e.

$$\mathcal{C}_r = \langle r, C \rangle,$$

where C is a set of CP blocks agreed by the facilitators of round r .

Here we define an important property which results from the interleaving nature of CP and TX blocks. It is used in our validation protocol.

Definition 4. Enclosure and agreed enclosure

If there exist a tuple $\langle c_{u,a}, c_{u,b} \rangle$ for a TX block $t_{u,i}$, where

$$\begin{aligned} a &= \arg \min_{k, k < i, \text{typeof}(b_{u,k})=\gamma} (i - k) \\ b &= \arg \min_{k, k > i, \text{typeof}(b_{u,k})=\gamma} (k - i), \end{aligned}$$

then $\langle c_{u,a}, c_{u,b} \rangle$ is the enclosure of $t_{u,i}$. Intuitively, that is the two closest CP blocks that surround $t_{u,i}$. Note that $c_{u,a}$ is the more recent CP block. Also, some TX blocks may not have any enclosure, then its enclosure is \perp . Agreed enclosure is the same as enclosure with an extra constraint where the CP blocks must be in some consensus result \mathcal{C}_r .

Note that the “closest CP blocks” property must also apply to agreed enclosure. Suppose a chain is in the form $\{c_i, c_{i+1}, t_{i+2}, c_{i+3}\}$ ⁵ and c_i, c_{i+1}, c_{i+3} are in $\mathcal{C}_r, \mathcal{C}_{r+1}, \mathcal{C}_{r+3}$ respectively, then the agreed enclosure of t_{i+2} is $\langle c_{i+1}, c_{i+3} \rangle$ and cannot be $\langle c_i, c_{i+3} \rangle$.

Definition 5. Fragment and agreed fragment

If the enclosure of some TX block $t_{u,i}$ is $\langle c_{u,a}, c_{u,b} \rangle$, then its fragment $F_{u,i}$ is defined as $\{b_{u,i} : a \leq i \leq b\}$. Similarly, agreed fragment has the same definition as fragment but using agreed enclosure. For convenience, the function `agreed_fragment(\cdot)` represents the agreed fragment of some TX block if it exists, otherwise \perp .

3.4 Consensus protocol

Our scalable consensus protocol runs on top of Extended TrustChain. It uses an unmodified asynchronous subset consensus (ACS) algorithm as the key building block. The objectives of the protocol are to allow honest nodes always make progress (in the form of creating new CP blocks), compute correct consensus result in every round and have an unbiased election of facilitators. Concretely, we define the necessary properties as follows.

⁵Usually the notation is of the form $c_{u,i}$, but the node identity is not important here so we simplify it to c_i

Definition 6. Properties of the consensus protocol

$\forall r \in \mathbb{N}$, the following properties must hold.

1. Agreement: *If one correct node outputs a set of facilitators \mathcal{F}_r , then every node outputs \mathcal{F}_r*
2. Validity: *If any correct node outputs \mathcal{F}_r , then*
 - (a) $|\mathcal{C}_r| \geq N - t$ and each CP in \mathcal{C}_r belong to a different node⁶.
 - (b) \mathcal{F}_r must contain at least $n - t$ honest nodes and
 - (c) $|\mathcal{F}_r| = n$.
3. Fairness: *Every node with a CP block in \mathcal{C}_r should have an equal probability of becoming a member of \mathcal{F}_r .*
4. Termination: *Every correct node eventually outputs some \mathcal{F}_r .*

These properties are similar to Byzantine consensus properties (which we describe next in Section 3.4.1), but there are subtle differences. Firstly, they are properties for every node in the network and not just the facilitators. Secondly, they must be satisfied for all rounds, because a failure in one round will lead to failures in subsequent rounds.

Before describing the protocol in detail, we take a brief detour to give background on the ACS protocol as it is the primary building block. Then we move on to describe the two phases of our consensus protocol—bootstrap phase and consensus phase.

3.4.1 Background on asynchronous subset consensus

The best way to explain ACS is to contrast it with the typical Byzantine consensus. We adapt the description from [42, Chapter 17].

Definition 7. Byzantine consensus

There are n nodes, of which at most t might experience Byzantine fault. Node i starts with an input value v_i . The nodes must decide for one of those values, satisfying the following.

1. Agreement: *If a correct node outputs v , then every node outputs v .*
2. Validity: *The decision value must be the input value of a node.*
3. Termination: *All correct nodes terminate in finite time.*

⁶ \mathcal{C}_r is a tuple but we abuse the notation here by writing $|\mathcal{C}_r|$ to mean the number of CP blocks in the second element of \mathcal{C}_r .

A node under Byzantine fault means that it can have arbitrary behaviour. For example not sending a message or colluding with other Byzantine nodes to undermine the entire system. Note that the decision is on a single value. This is in contrast to ACS which we describe next.

ACS is an especially useful primitive for blockchain systems. It allows any party to propose a value and the result is the set union of all the proposed values by the majority. Concretely, ACS needs to satisfy the following properties (adapted from [25]).

Definition 8. Asynchronous subset consensus

There are n nodes, of which at most t might experience Byzantine fault. Node i starts with a non-empty set of input values C_i . The nodes must decide an output C , satisfying the following.

1. Agreement: *If a correct node outputs C , then every node outputs C .*
2. Validity: *If any correct node outputs a set C , then $|C| \geq n - t$ and C contains the input of at least $n - 2t$ nodes.*
3. Termination: *If $n - t$ nodes receive an input, then all correct nodes produce an output.*

ACS has the nice property of censorship resilience when compared to other consensus algorithms. For instance, Hyperledger and Tendermint uses a variant of Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance (PBFT) [23] as their consensus algorithm. In PBFT, a leader is elected, if the leader is malicious but follows the protocol, then it can selectively filter transactions. In contrast, every party in ACS are involved in the proposal phase, and it guarantees that if $n - 2t$ parties propose the same transaction, then it must be in the agreed output. Thus, if some value is submitted to at least $n - 2t$ nodes, it is guaranteed to be in the consensus result. For a detailed description of ACS, we refer to the HoneyBadgerBFT work [25]. To understand the remainder of this work, the knowledge of Definition 8 is sufficient.

The main drawback with ACS and also Byzantine consensus algorithms is the high message complexity. Typically, such protocols have a message complexity of $O(n^2)$, where n is the number of parties. Hence, it may work with a small number of nodes, but it is infeasible for blockchain systems where thousands of nodes are involved.

3.4.2 Bootstrap phase

Now we have all the necessary information to describe our consensus protocol. As with all distributed systems, there must be a bootstrap phase which sets up the system.

The reader may notice from the system overview (Section 3.1) that the facilitators are computed from the consensus result, but the consensus result is agreed by

the facilitators. Thus we have a dependency cycle. The goal of the bootstrap phase is to give us a starting point in the cycle.

To bootstrap, imagine that there is some bootstrap oracle, that initiates the code on every node. The code satisfies all the properties in Definition 6. Namely, every node has the same set of valid facilitators \mathcal{F}_1 that are randomly chosen. This concludes the bootstrap phase. For any future rounds, the consensus phase is used.

In practice, the bootstrap oracle is most likely the software developer and some of the desired properties cannot be achieved. In particular, it is not possible to have the fairness property because it is unlikely that the developer knows the identity of every node in advance.

3.4.3 Consensus phase

The consensus phase begins when \mathcal{F}_r is available to all the nodes. Note that \mathcal{F}_r indicates the facilitators that were elected using results of round r and are responsible for driving the ACS protocol in round $r + 1$. The goal is to reach agreement on a set of new facilitators \mathcal{F}_{r+1} that satisfies the four properties in Definition 6.

There are two scenarios in the consensus phase. First, if node u is not the facilitator, it sends $\langle \text{cp_msg}, c_{u,h} \rangle$ to all the facilitators. Second, if the node is a facilitator, it waits until $N - t$ messages of type `cp_msg` are received. Invalid messages are removed. That is blocks with invalid signatures and blocks signed by the same key. With the sufficient number of `cp_msg` messages, it begins the ACS algorithm and some \mathcal{C}'_{r+1} should be agreed upon by the end of it. Duplicates and blocks with invalid signatures are again removed from \mathcal{C}'_{r+1} and we call the final result \mathcal{C}_{r+1} . We have to remove invalid blocks a second time (after ACS) because the adversary may send different CP blocks to different facilitators, which results in invalid blocks in the ACS output, but not in any of the inputs.

The core of the consensus phase is the ACS protocol. While any ACS protocol that satisfies the standard definition will work, we use a simplification of HoneyBadgerBFT [25] as our ACS protocol because it is a consensus algorithm designed for blockchain systems. We do not use the full HoneyBadgerBFT due to the following. First, the transactions in HoneyBadgerBFT are first queued in a buffer and the main consensus algorithm starts only when the buffer reaches an optimal size. We do not have an infinite stream of CP blocks, thus buffering is unsuitable. Second, HoneyBadgerBFT uses threshold encryption to hide the content of the transactions. But we do not reach consensus on transactions, only CP blocks, so hiding CP blocks is meaningless for us as it contains no transaction information.

Continuing, when \mathcal{F}_r reaches agreement on \mathcal{C}_{r+1} , they immediately broadcast two messages to all the nodes— first the consensus message $\langle \text{cons_msg}, \mathcal{C}_{r+1} \rangle$, and second the signature message $\langle \text{cons_sig}, r, \text{sig} \rangle$. The reason for sending `cons_sig` is the following. Recall that channels are not authenticated, and there are no signatures in \mathcal{C}_{r+1} . If a non-facilitator sees some \mathcal{C}_{r+1} , it cannot immediately trust it because it may have been forged. Thus, To guarantee authenticity, every facilitator sends an additional message that is the signature of \mathcal{C}_{r+1} .

Upon receiving \mathcal{C}_{r+1} and at least $n - f$ valid signatures by some node u , u performs two tasks. First, it creates a new CP block using `new_cp`(\mathcal{C}_{r+1}) (Algorithm 1). Second, it computes the new facilitators using `get_facilitator`(\mathcal{C}_{r+1}, n) (Algorithm 2), and updates its facilitator set to the result. This concludes the consensus phase and brings us back to the state at the beginning of the consensus phase, so a new round can be started.

Algorithm 1 Function `new_cp`(\mathcal{C}_r) runs in the context of the caller u . It creates a new CP block and appends it to u 's chain.

```

 $\langle r, - \rangle \leftarrow \mathcal{C}_r$ 
 $h \leftarrow |B_u|$ 
 $c_{u,h} \leftarrow \langle H(b_{u,h-1}), h, H(\mathcal{C}_r), r, sig_u \rangle$ 
 $B_u \leftarrow B_u \cup c_{u,h}$ 

```

Algorithm 2 Function `get_facilitator`(\mathcal{C}_r, n) takes the consensus result \mathcal{C}_r and an integer n , then sorts the CP blocks C by the luck value (the λ -expression), and outputs the smallest n elements.

```

 $\langle r, C \rangle \leftarrow \mathcal{C}_r$ 
 $\text{take}(n, \text{sort\_by}(\lambda x. H(\mathcal{C}_r || pk \text{ of } x), C))$ 

```

Our protocol has some similarities with synchronizers [42, Chapter 10] because it is effectively a technique to introduce synchrony in an asynchronous environment. If we consider the facilitators as a collective authority, then it can be seen as a synchronizer that sends pulse messages (in the form of `cons_msg` and `cons_sig`) to indicate the start of a new clock pulse. Every node then sends a completion messages (in the form of `cp_msg`) to the new collective authority to indicate that they are ready for the next pulse.

3.5 Transaction protocol

The TX protocol, shown in Algorithm 4, is run by all nodes. It is also known as True Halves, first described informally by Veldhuisen [43, Chapter 3.2]. Nodes that wish to initiate a transaction calls `new_tx`($pk_v, m, txid$) (Algorithm 3) with the intended counterparty v identified by pk_v and message m . $txid$ should be a uniformly distributed random value, i.e. $txid \in_R \{0, 1\}^{256}$. Then the initiator sends $\langle tx_req, t_{u,h} \rangle$ to v .

A key feature of the TX protocol is that it is non-blocking. At no time in Algorithm 3 or Algorithm 4 do we need to hold the chain state and wait for some message to be delivered before committing a new block to the chain. This allows for a high level of concurrency where we can call `new_tx`(\cdot) multiple times without waiting for the corresponding `tx_resp` messages.

Algorithm 3 Function $\text{new_tx}(pk_v, m, txid)$ generates a new TX block and appends it to the caller u 's chain. It is executed in the private context of u , i.e. it has access to the sk_u and B_u . The necessary arguments are the public key of the counterparty pk_v , the transaction message m and the transaction identifier $txid$.

$$\begin{aligned}
h &\leftarrow |B_u| \\
t_{u,h} &\leftarrow \langle H(b_{u,h-1}), h, txid, pk_v, m, sig_u \rangle \\
B_u &\leftarrow B_u \cup \{t_{u,h}\}
\end{aligned}$$

Algorithm 4 The TX protocol which runs in the context of node u .

Upon $\langle \text{tx_req}, t_{v,j} \rangle$ from v
 $\langle -, -, txid, pk_v, m, - \rangle \leftarrow t_{v,j}$
 $\text{new_tx}(pk_u, m, txid)$
store $t_{v,j}$ as the pair of $t_{u,h}$
send $\langle \text{tx_resp}, t_{u,h} \rangle$ to v
Upon $\langle \text{tx_resp}, t_{v,j} \rangle$ from v
 $\langle -, -, txid, pk_v, m, - \rangle \leftarrow t_{v,j}$
store $t_{v,j}$ as the pair of the TX with identifier $txid$

3.6 Validation protocol

Up to this point, we do not provide a mechanism to detect tampering. The validation protocol aims to solve this issue. The protocol is also a request-response protocol, just like the transaction protocol. But before explaining the protocol itself, we first define what it means for a transaction to be valid.

3.6.1 Validity definition

A transaction can be in one of three states in terms of validity—*valid*, *invalid* and *unknown*. Given a fragment $F_{v,j}$, the validity of the TX block $t_{u,i}$ with its corresponding fragment $F_{u,i}$ is captured by the function $\text{get_validity}(t_{u,i}, F_{u,i}, F_{v,j})$ (Algorithm 5). Note that $t_{u,i}$ and $F_{u,i}$ are assumed to be valid, otherwise the node calling the function would have no point of reference. This is not difficult to achieve, because typically the caller is u , so it knows its own TX block and the corresponding agreed fragment. If the caller is not u , it can always query for the agreed fragment that contains the transaction of interest from u .

Algorithm 5 works as follows. Before Line 3, we essentially check whether the fragment is the one that the verifier needs. If it is not, then the verifier cannot make any decision and return *unknown*. This is likely to be the case for new transactions because the result of $\text{agreed_fragment}(\cdot)$ would be \perp . The next two conditions check for tampering or missing blocks, if any of these misconducts are detected, then the TX is invalid.

We stress that the *unknown* state means that the verifier does not have enough in-

formation to continue with the validation protocol. If enough information is available at a later time, then the verifier will output either *valid* or *invalid*.

Note that the validity is on a transaction (two TX blocks with the same *txid*), rather than on one TX block owned by a single party. It is defined this way because the malicious sender may create new TX blocks in their own chain but never send *tx_req* messages. In that case, it may seem that the counterparty, who is honest, purposefully omitted TX blocks. But in reality, it was the malicious sender who did not follow the protocol. Thus, in such cases, the whole transaction identified by its *txid* is marked as invalid.

Algorithm 5 Function $\text{get_validity}(t_{u,i}, F_{u,i}, F_{v,j})$ validates the transaction represented by $t_{u,i}$. We assume $F_{u,i}$ is always correct and contains $t_{u,i}$. $F_{v,j}$ is the corresponding fragment received from v .

```

1: if  $F_{v,j}$  is not a fragment created in the same round as  $F_{u,i}$  then
2:   return unknown
3:
4:  $\langle -, -, txid, pk_v, m, - \rangle \leftarrow t_{u,i}$ 
5: if number of blocks of txid in  $F_{v,j} \neq 1$  then
6:   return invalid
7:
8:  $t_{v,j} \leftarrow$  the TX block with txid in  $F_{v,j}$ 
9:  $\langle -, -, txid', pk_u, m', - \rangle \leftarrow t_{v,j}$ 
10: if  $m \neq m' \vee txid \neq txid'$  then
11:   return invalid
12:
13: if  $t_{u,i}$  is not signed by  $pk_u \vee t_{v,j}$  is not signed by  $pk_v$  then
14:   return invalid
15: return valid

```

3.6.2 Validation protocol

Our validation protocol, shown in Algorithm 6, is designed to classify transactions according to the aforementioned validity definition. If u wishes to validate some TX with ID *txid* and counterparty v , it sends $\langle \text{vd_req}, txid \rangle$ to v . The desired properties of the validation protocol are as follows.

Definition 9. Properties of the validation protocol

1. Agreement: *If any correct node decides on the validity (except when it is unknown) of a transaction, then all other correct nodes are able to reach the same conclusion or unknown.*
2. Validity: *The validation protocol outputs the correct result according to the aforementioned validity definition.*

3. Liveness: Any valid (invalid) transaction is marked as valid (invalid) eventually.

Algorithm 6 Validation protocol which runs in the context of u

Upon $\langle \text{vd_req}, txid \rangle$ from v
 $t_{u,i} \leftarrow$ the transaction identified by $txid$
 $F_{u,i} \leftarrow \text{agreed_fragment}(t_{u,i})$
send $\langle \text{vd_resp}, txid, F_{u,i} \rangle$ to v
Upon $\langle \text{vd_resp}, txid, F_{v,j} \rangle$ from v
 $t_{u,i} \leftarrow$ the transaction identified by $txid$
if $F_{u,i}$ and $F_{v,j}$ are available and $F_{u,i}$ is the agreed fragment of $t_{u,i}$ **then**
set the validity of $t_{u,i}$ to $\text{get_validity}(t_{u,i}, F_{u,j}, F_{v,j})$

We make two remarks. First, just like the TX protocol, we do not block any part of the protocol. Second, suppose some $F_{v,j}$ validates $t_{u,i}$, then that does not imply that $t_{u,i}$ only has one pair $t_{v,j}$. Our validity requirement only requires that there is only one $t_{v,j}$ in the correct consensus round. The counterparty may create any number of fake pairs in later consensus rounds. But these fake pairs only pollutes the chain of v and can never be validated because the round is incorrect.

3.7 Design variations and tradeoffs

Up to this point, we have discussed our protocol in the context of the model and assumptions defined in Section 3.2. In this section, we explore a few design variations which we can make, some of them require a relaxed version of our original model. They enable better performance, allow us to apply our design in the fully permissionless setting and improves privacy.

3.7.1 Using epidemic protocol to reduce communication cost

One of the final steps in our consensus protocol is to broadcast the consensus result and signatures to every other node (Section 3.4.3). While this guarantees delivery (since we assumed reliable channel), it is wasteful. For example, if every facilitator is honest, a node would receive n consensus results which are identical when only one is necessary. Furthermore, realistic networks do not offer a broadcast primitive, i.e. firewalls may block incoming messages from certain nodes.

An improvement is use an epidemic protocol [44] (also known as gossiping) instead of our broadcast approach. Typical epidemic protocols works as follows. Every node buffers every message it receives up to some buffer size b . Then it forwards the messages t number of times. Every time the message is sent to f random neighbours, f is often called the fan-out. The upside of using epidemic protocol is that the communication cost is distributed more evenly between nodes. This is

especially true with a lazy push approach where the node who just received a message would push the message ID (e.g. digest) to its f random neighbours, and only push the full message if the neighbour explicitly requests the message [45]. With this, nodes typically only need to receive one consensus result message instead of n .

A down side of an epidemic protocol is that it usually takes $O(\log N)$ time to infect the whole network, whereas broadcasting uses constant time. Another downside of some epidemic protocols (e.g. eager push) is that it is difficult to guarantee delivery. It is especially true when the parameters are not chosen correctly in a network that is only partially connected (but every node is nevertheless reachable). If the delivery cannot be guaranteed, then we cannot guarantee liveness in our consensus protocol because a future facilitator may miss the memo. Picking parameters are difficult in practice because the network configuration is unknown and the total number of nodes might also be unknown.

3.7.2 Using timing assumption in the permissionless setting

Our model is purely asynchronous, where we make no timing assumptions anywhere in the protocol. However, in many applications it is often fine to make timing assumptions. For example, TCP relies on timeout for its retransmission and the `nLockTime` property in Bitcoin transactions makes the transaction unspendable until some time in the future (either Unix time or block height) [46]. One limitation of our system is that we use the parameter N in our algorithms, which makes it unsuitable for the permissionless environment where users can join and leave at will. In this section we show how making a timing assumption would allow us to operate in the permissionless setting.

At the start of our consensus phase (Section 3.4.3), facilitators must wait for $N - f$ `cp_msg` messages. This is the only place where we used N as a parameter. To introduce timing, instead of waiting for $N - f$ messages, we wait for some time D , such that D is sufficiently long for honest nodes to send their CP blocks to the facilitators. Consequently, this removes the need for a PKI because the collected CP blocks may be from nodes that nobody has seen in the past. However, choosing the parameter D is difficult and depends on a number of factors such as the network condition, message size, and so on. Overestimating it would make agreed fragments much longer than usual, which increases communication costs for validation. Underestimating it would lead to unfairness where users with a poor internet connection will have a lower chance to be selected as a facilitator in the next round. Nevertheless, there is a significant gain for making the timing assumption and that is the ability to operate in the permissionless setting which we explain next.

Suppose a new node wish to join the network and the facilitators are known (this can be done with a public registry). It simply sends its latest CP block to the facilitators. Then, in the next round, the node will have a chance to become a facilitator just like any existing node. To leave the network, nodes simply stop

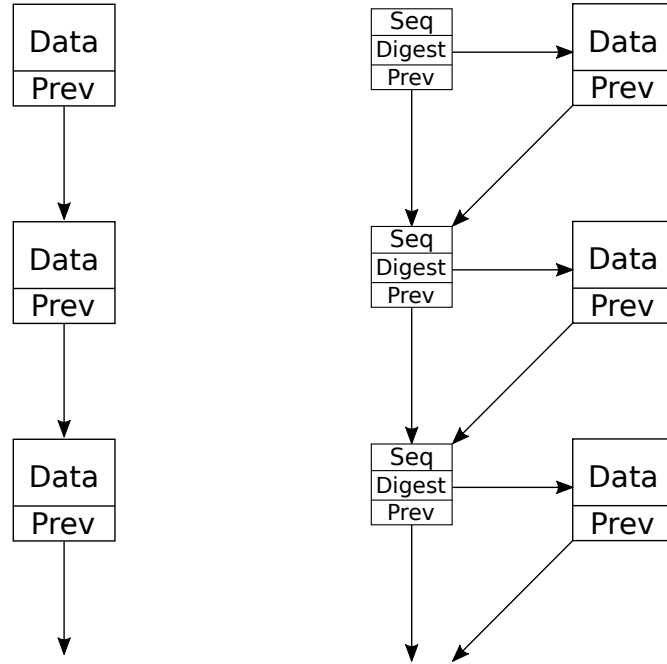


Figure 3.4: The chain on the left represent direct chaining, where the digest in “Prev” is simply the digest of the previous block. The chain on the right uses compact blocks, represented by the smaller squares. Compact blocks also form a chain as before, but they each have a hash pointer to the full block, identified by “Seq” and “Digest”.

submitting CP blocks. There is a subtlety here which happens when the node is elected as a facilitator in the following round. In this case, the node must fulfil its obligation by completing the consensus protocol, but without proposing its own CP block, before leaving. Otherwise, the $n \geq 3t + 1$ condition may be violated.

3.7.3 Privacy preserving validation protocol using compact blocks

Our approach already has privacy preserving features in comparison to early blockchain systems. That is, the transactions for each node are only revealed during the validation protocol. Hence if two nodes never directly or indirectly interact with each other, their transactions are never revealed.

We can take our privacy-preserving property one step further by introducing another level of hash pointer indirection. The result is shown in Figure 3.4.

Concretely, we introduce an additional block type, namely compact block. Such blocks only have three attributes,

1. Seq—the sequence number its corresponding block,
2. Digest—the digest of its corresponding block, and

3. Prev—the digest of the previous compact block.

Each compact block has a corresponding full block (either a CP block or a TX block). The relationship is uniquely identified with Seq or Digest. Recall that our original validation protocol requires the nodes to send the full agreed fragment. With compact blocks, it is only necessary to send the compact version of the agreed fragment. The validation then proceeds in a similar fashion, provided that the pair of the to-be-validated TX block is known.

The space saving of this approach depends on the size of the full blocks. If the full blocks are on average 500 bytes (which is the typical size of Bitcoin transactions [47]), and the compact blocks are $32 + 32 + 8 = 72$ bytes (SHA256 digests are 32 bytes each and we use a 64-bit integer to represent the sequence number), then the saving in communication cost is 86%.

3.7.4 Optimising validation protocol using cached agreed fragments

One more way to improve the efficiency of the validation protocol is to use a single agreed fragment to validate multiple transactions. Concretely, for node *A*, upon receiving an agreed fragment from node *B*, rather than validating a single transaction, *A* attempts to validate all transactions performed with *B* in the unknown state, in that fragment.

The benefit of this technique is maximised when a node only transacts with one other node. In this case, the communication of one fragment is sufficient to validate all transactions in that fragment. In the opposite extreme, if every transaction that the node makes is with another unique node, then the caching mechanism would have no effect.

3.7.5 Total fork detection

The validation algorithm guarantees that there are no forks within a single agreed fragment. This is sufficient for some applications such as proving the existence of some information. However, for applications such as digital cash where every block depends on one or more previous blocks, our scheme is not suitable. For such applications, we need to guarantee that there are no forks from the genesis block leading up to the TX block of interest.

We offer two approaches to do total fork detection. First and the easiest solution is to simply ask for the complete chain of the counterparty. The verifier can be sure that there are no forks if the following holds.

1. The hash pointers are correct.
2. All the CP blocks are in consensus.
3. The TX of interest is in the chain.

We use this approach in our prior work on Implicit Consensus [48]. Nodes employ caching to minimise communication costs, we call this effect spontaneous sharding.

The second approach is probabilistic but with only a constant communication overhead over our current design. For a node, observe that if all of its agreed fragments has a transaction with an honest node, then the complete chain is effectively validated in a distributed manner. The only way for an attacker to make a fork is to make sure that the agreed fragment containing the fork has no transactions with honest nodes. Such malicious behaviour is prevented probabilistically using a challenge-response protocol as follows. Suppose node A wish to make a transaction with node B . A first sends a challenge to B asking it to prove that it holds a valid agreed fragment between some consensus round specified by A . If B provides a correct and timely response, then they run the transaction protocol as usual. Otherwise, A would refuse to make the transaction.

The probability that an honest node catches out a malicious node is

$$p = \frac{f}{r},$$

where f is the number of bad agreed fragments and r is the latest round number. If there are more nodes (say n) trying to make transactions with the malicious node, then the probability that the malicious node gets caught at least once (denoted by the random variable X) follows a binomial distribution, i.e.

$$\Pr[X > 0] = \sum_{k=1}^n \binom{n}{k} p^k (1-p)^{n-k}.$$

Chapter 4

Analysis of correctness and performance

Up to this point, we described our system specification in detail. Of course, specification alone does not establish any truths. In this chapter, we evaluate our system analytically. First, we show it has the desired properties. That is, the properties of the consensus protocol and the validation protocol (Definition 6 and Definition 9 respectively) should hold. Then we analyse the performance, especially the throughput, and show that it out performs early blockchain systems. Finally, we consider the case where the $n \geq 3t + 1$ assumption is violated and show the effect of it in our system.

4.1 Correctness in the presence of faults

Our first objective is to show that Definition 6 holds for our consensus protocol. Then, building on top of it, we show Definition 9 holds for the validation protocol. The resulting theorem shows that only using CP blocks in the consensus algorithm implies consensus on TX blocks.

4.1.1 Correctness of the consensus protocol

We begin our analysis by establishing truths on the four properties in Definition 6, namely agreement, validity, fairness and termination for an arbitrary round. Using these results, we use mathematical induction to show that they hold for all rounds.

Lemma 1. *For an arbitrary round r if \mathcal{F}_r is known by all correct nodes and one correct node outputs a list of facilitators \mathcal{F}_{r+1} , then all correct nodes output \mathcal{F}_{r+1} .*

Proof. The argument follows from the protocol description. Given that \mathcal{F}_r is known, correct nodes will send CP blocks to all members in \mathcal{F}_r . The ACS algorithm starts independently whenever the facilitator has $N - t$ valid CP blocks (recall from Section 3.4.3 that invalid blocks are ones with an invalid signature or

has a duplicate signature). It cannot make progress until $n - t$ honest facilitators start algorithm, but this eventually happens because there are $N - t$ correct nodes and all correct facilitator eventually receives $N - t$ valid CP blocks. At the end of ACS, \mathcal{C}_{r+1} is created and then broadcasted along with the signature of the facilitators. Due to the agreement property of ACS (Definition 8), every correct node should receive at least $n - t$ valid signatures on the agreed \mathcal{C}_{r+1} . Thus they use \mathcal{C}_{r+1} to generate a new CP block and compute new facilitators. Since `get_facilitators`(\cdot) is a deterministic algorithm and the input \mathcal{C}_{r+1} is in agreement, the output \mathcal{F}_{r+1} is also in agreement. \square

Lemma 2. *For an arbitrary round r , if \mathcal{F}_r is known by all correct nodes and any correct node outputs \mathcal{F}_{r+1} , then (a) $|\mathcal{C}_{r+1}| \geq N - t$ must hold for the \mathcal{C}_{r+1} which was used to create \mathcal{F}_{r+1} , (b) \mathcal{F}_{r+1} must contain at least $n - t$ honest nodes and (c) $|\mathcal{F}_{r+1}| = n$.*

Proof. The validity follows from the validity property of ACS and the definition of our model, namely $N \geq n + t$ and $n \geq 3t + 1$. Given \mathcal{F}_r , since $N \geq n + t$, there is at least n nodes that would send their CP block to \mathcal{F}_r . From the validity property of ACS, we know the output must contain the input of at least $n - 2t$ nodes. But $n - t$ facilitators must have received $N - t$ valid CP blocks, so $|\mathcal{C}_{r+1}| \geq N - t$, this proves (a). There are at least $n - t$ honest nodes in \mathcal{F}_{r+1} which follows from our assumption, this proves (b). Finally, since $N - t \geq (n + t) - t = n$ and `get_facilitators`(\cdot) outputs n items, $|\mathcal{F}_{r+1}| = n$ and this proves (c). \square

Lemma 3. *For an arbitrary round r , if \mathcal{F}_r is known by all correct nodes then every node with a CP block in \mathcal{C}_{r+1} should have an equal probability to be elected as a facilitator in \mathcal{F}_{r+1} .*

Proof. We already established that $|\mathcal{C}_{r+1}| \geq N - t \geq n$ from Lemma 2. Then the proof directly follows from the random oracle model. Recall that the luck value is computed using $H(\mathcal{C}_{r+1}, ||pk_u)$. Since pk_u is unique for every node that has a CP block in \mathcal{C}_{r+1} , the output of $H(\cdot)$ is uniformly random. This effectively generates a random permutation so every node has the same probability of being in the top n for the ordered sequence, namely the output of `get_facilitators`(\cdot). \square

Lemma 4. *For an arbitrary round r , if \mathcal{F}_r is known by all correct nodes then every correct node eventually outputs some \mathcal{F}_{r+1} .*

Proof. This follows directly from the properties of the channel (eventual delivery) and the termination property of ACS. That is, \mathcal{F}_r eventually receives all the CP blocks required to begin ACS, and then ACS eventually terminates. Finally, the results are eventually disseminated to all the nodes. \square

From Lemmas 1, 2, 3 and 4, we have shown that the 4 properties of Definition 6 holds when assuming the existence of some \mathcal{F}_r . Thus, to proof the whole of Definition 6, we need to proof these 4 properties under the universal quantifier. We do this using mathematical induction.

Theorem 1. *For all rounds, the consensus protocol satisfies agreement, validity, fairness and termination (Definition 6).*

Proof. We proof using mathematical induction.

In the base case ($r = 1$), agreement, validity fairness and termination follows directly from the bootstrap protocol. Note that the result is \mathcal{F}_1 , which indicates the facilitators that are agreed in round 1, who are responsible for driving the ACS protocol in round 2.

For the inductive step, we assume that the 4 properties hold in round r and prove that they also hold in round $r + 1$. Using Lemmas 1, 2, 3 and 4, it directly follows from modus ponens that these properties hold for $r + 1$. Due to the principals of mathematical induction, these properties hold for all r . \square

4.1.2 Correctness of the validation protocol

The consensus protocol, which ensures consensus on CP blocks and facilitators, is the backbone for consensus on transactions. In this section, we build on top of Theorem 1 to show that the properties except for liveness in Definition 9 can be satisfied.

Theorem 2. *The validation protocol satisfies agreement and validity properties.*

Proof. We proof the agreement property by contradiction. From Algorithm 5, we use the fact that $F_{u,i}$ and $t_{u,i}$ are valid. Without loss of generality, suppose for some transaction with TX block t , node u decides *valid* but node v decides *invalid*. Then there exists a fragment $F' = \{\dots, t', c'\}$ which u received that contains a valid pair of t — t' . There also exists a fragment $F'' = \{\dots, t'', c''\}$ which v received that does not contain or contains an invalid pair— t'' . In both cases, the `get_validity(\cdot)` function must have reached Line 3. Due to Theorem 1, we have $c' = c''$, otherwise the result would be *unknown*. Since $c' (= c'') = \langle H(t'), \dots \rangle$ we must have $H(t') = H(t'')$ and $t' \neq t''$ (because t'' is invalid). In other words, the sender of F'' must be able to create some t'' that has the same digest as t' . But this is only possible if the adversary can compute the inverse of $H(\cdot)$ with non-negligible probability. Thus we have a contradiction and this completes the agreement proof.

Our protocol uses Algorithm 5 which is also the validity definition, so the validity property is also satisfied. \square

Theorem 2 shows that agreement on CP blocks would lead to agreement on TX blocks when the nodes are running the validation protocol. Like in our prior work [48], we call this behaviour implicit consensus. One of the main advantages of our scheme over running a consensus algorithm on all the transactions is that the transaction throughput is no longer dependent on the consensus algorithm—ACS. This enables horizontal scalability where adding new nodes would lead to higher global transaction rate. In addition, a convenient consequence Theorem 2 is

unforgeability. That is, no polynomial time adversary is able to create two chains, $F = \{\dots, t, c\}$ and $F' = \{\dots, t', c\}$, with correct hash pointers and the same end of chain c .

A stronger version of the validity definition exists. That is, if two honest nodes make a transaction, then the transaction state is always valid in addition to our current validity definition. Under our purely asynchronous model, we cannot guarantee this stronger version. Since the adversary can delay any message for any amount of time, it can make sure all `tx_req` messages are delivered in a round later than the round which the message is sent. Effectively, the transaction pair would always be in different rounds and the validation protocol would not output *valid*. We believe in a relaxed model, i.e. a weakly synchronous model, a stronger validity definition is possible.

4.1.3 Impossibility of liveness

Theorem 2 is a major result that allows significantly improved performance over traditional blockchain systems, but it does not have all the properties of a typical Byzantine consensus protocol. Now we show a negative result, where the liveness property of Definition 9 cannot be attained. Meaning that transactions with adversaries cannot always be validated.

Lemma 5. *There exists a valid transaction that cannot be validated eventually.*

Proof. Suppose nodes u and v correctly performed the TX protocol to create a transaction. Then when u wants to validate it, it does so by sending `vd_req` message to v . v can act maliciously and ignore all `vd_req` message, then the transaction can never be validated. \square

Although this is a negative result, it does not put the adversary in an advantageous position. If the adversary is observed to ignore validation requests, then the honest nodes may prefer not to transact with her in the future. Thus, to stay relevant in the system, the adversary needs to comply with the protocol.

4.2 Performance analysis

This section aims to analytically answer the scalability aspect of our research question. That is, does the global throughput increase linearly with respect to the population size? We begin by looking at the communication and time complexity of the consensus protocol, and then the bandwidth requirement for a single transaction. We build on top of those results to analyse the global throughput.

4.2.1 Communication complexity of the consensus protocol

The consensus protocol can be seen as three parts, so the communication complexity is the sum of these parts. The first part is when every node sends their CP block

to all the facilitators, which is $O(Nn)$ since there are N nodes and n facilitators. Or simply $O(N)$ if we consider n as a constant.

The second part is ACS. The communication complexity of ACS is $O(n^2|v| + \lambda n^3 \log n)$ [25], where $|v|$ is the size of the largest message and λ is the security parameter (described in Section 3.2). In our system, we wish to understand the scalability property. Thus we consider the complexity as a function of N rather than n or λ . Since $|v|$ is at most all the CP blocks from every node, we have $|v| = kN$, where k is a constant representing the size of one CP block. Therefore the communication complexity of ACS in our system is $O(N)$. Since we use a constant n , $O(N)$ communication complexity also holds for a single facilitator.

The third and final part is the dissemination, where the facilitators broadcast the consensus result along with their signatures. For the same reason as the first part, this is also $O(N)$. Thus the combined communication complexity is $O(N)$ for a constant n .

4.2.2 Duration of the consensus protocol

In order to make arguments on bandwidth or throughput in our purely asynchronous model, which are concepts that depend on time, we must make some assumptions regarding our model to make arguments on the duration of the consensus protocol. Note that it is not the same as the time complexity typically used in distributed systems. In the analysis of distributed algorithms, time complexity is often in terms of the number of rounds. For example, ACS runs in a constant number of rounds because of its sub-protocols—reliable broadcast and binary Byzantine consensus—also run in a constant number of rounds [25]. However, in practice, making a unit of communication always has some overhead associated with it, for example serialising and writing it to some network socket. Hence, for the remainder of our performance analysis, we add the following to our computational model. For every unit of communication, we assume they take some non-negligible but constant time to perform. Hence, from Section 4.2.1 and the fact that the consensus protocol uses a constant number of rounds, it follows that the consensus protocol has a duration of $O(N)$.

4.2.3 Communication cost for transactions

Geared with the results above, we are ready to analyse the amount of data required to be transmitted over a link per transaction. Which we call the communication cost per transaction. To create and then validate a transaction, the communication cost per transaction is of $O(l)$, where l is the length of the agreed fragment. This can be seen from the fact that the largest message by far is the `vd_resp` message, which contains the agreed fragment. The other messages (`tx_req`, `tx_resp` and `vd_req`) are constant factors. If we assume that every node performs transactions at a constant rate of r_{tx} per second. Then

$$l = r_{tx} D_c,$$

where D_c is the duration a round of the consensus protocol. But from Section 4.2.2, we know that D_c is of $O(N)$, thus the communication cost per transaction is $O(N)$. This is intuitive because round duration would be longer if there are more CP blocks (more N), which means that the agreed fragments are longer (assuming nodes transact at a constant rate). The behaviour is verified experimentally in Chapter 5.

4.2.4 Linear global throughput

Using our results so far, we are able to analyse the global throughput. First, we clarify the bandwidth definition, which is “the data rate at which a network link or a network path can transfer” [49]. Now, suppose every node has some fixed bandwidth C per link, N links and are making transactions at r_{tx} per second. Then we have the inequality

$$NC \geq r_{tx}l,$$

where l is the length of the agreed fragment as before. The inequality suggests that the rate for which transactions and validations are made cannot exceed the total bandwidth of all the links.

We note that the inequality does not hold if the node is only transacting with a subset of the population. This is because it cannot use all the bandwidth available in all the links. In the extreme case, if the node is only transacting with one other node, then it can only use the bandwidth of one link which is only C . However, if that is the case, we can intelligently cache the `vd_resp` messages as described in Section 3.7.4. For this work, we analyse the worst case where every node transacts with a random node from the population, and a new `vd_resp` must be sent for every `vd_req` message.

Consider the case where the system is making use of all the bandwidth, i.e. $NC = r_{tx}l$. Recall that l is of $O(N)$, that means LHS and RHS both grow linearly with respect to N . Hence, there exists some constant r_{tx} that makes use of all the available bandwidth regardless of N . Finally, if every node in the network is transacting at a constant rate, then the global throughput (in terms of transactions per second) is linear w.r.t. the population size N . If the system is not making use of all the bandwidth. We also maintain a constant transaction rate by the same argument. Thus a global throughput is also linear w.r.t. N . We verify both of these claims experimentally in Chapter 5.

4.3 Effect of a highly adversarial environment

Our last study considers the effect when the number of adversaries is more than t . This is useful because in practice it is difficult to guarantee that t satisfies $n \geq 3t + 1$, especially when N is large. Hence we are interested in the probability for this to happen under our facilitator election process.

The problem can be formulated as follows. Suppose an urn contains N balls, t are black (malicious) and $N - t$ are white (honest). If n balls are drawn uniformly at random without replacement, what is the probability that more than $\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor$ are black? The random variable X , in this case, is the number of black balls, or the number of successful events. It follows the hypergeometric distribution since we pick balls *without* replacement [50]. Hence, we are interested in the following probability.

$$1 - \sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor} \Pr[X = k] = 1 - \sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor} \frac{\binom{t}{k} \binom{N-t}{n-k}}{\binom{N}{n}}$$

This is not in closed form, but we can visualise the effect in Figure 4.1. We set the population size N to 2000 and plot the probability of more than $\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor$ successful events for different numbers of draws. Evidently, if the number of black balls (traitors) is a third of the population (666 out of 2000) we have about 0.5 probability of electing more than $\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor$ black balls for sufficiently large n . Thus, we cannot expect the system to function correctly when the expected value is close to the number of black balls that we can tolerate.

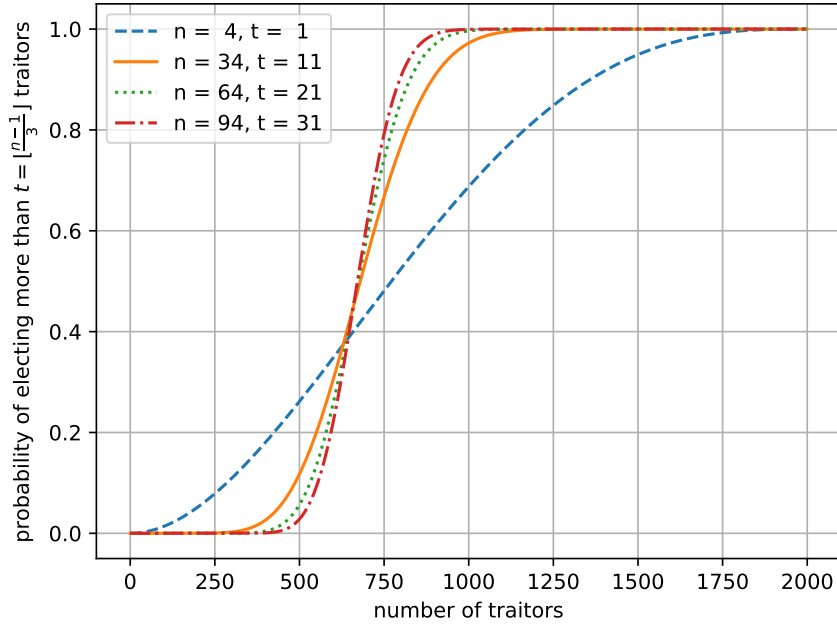


Figure 4.1: Plot of the probability of selecting more than $\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor$ black balls for different value of t with N fixed at 2000.

On the other hand, due to the fact that hypergeometric distributions have light tails with “faster-than-exponential fall-off” [50], the probability for picking more

than $\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor$ black balls when the expected value is much smaller than $\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor$ is small. We can use tail inequality to bound the probability of picking more than $\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor$ black balls when only $n\alpha$ are black where $0 \leq \alpha \leq \lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor / n$. The tail inequality is

$$\Pr[X \geq E[X] + \tau n] \leq e^{-2\tau^2 n},$$

where $E[X] = n\alpha$. We are interested in $\Pr[X \geq \lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor + 1]$, so

$$\tau = \frac{\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor + 1}{n} - \alpha$$

Putting τ back into the tail inequality we get the following bound.

$$\Pr[X \geq \lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor + 1] \leq e^{-2\left(\frac{\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor + 1}{n} - \alpha\right)^2 n}$$

The bound is not tight, but it is useful for picking parameters for a desired level of fault tolerance. For some fixed n , since $0 \leq \alpha \leq \lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor / n < (\lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor + 1) / n$, the probability is maximum when the squared term is minimum at $\alpha = \lfloor \frac{n-1}{3} \rfloor / n$. The probability is minimum when the squared term is maximum at $\alpha = 0$. Hence, if n is known, then we can pick a α such that the probability becomes small. On the other hand, if α is fixed, but small, we may increase n to achieve the same. To put this into perspective, suppose $n = 1000$ and $\alpha = 1/5$, i.e. a fifth of the nodes are malicious. Then the probability to draw more black balls than the threshold is only 2.6×10^{-16} .

Chapter 5

Implementation and experimental results

To build up the confidence of the horizontal scalability claim from our analytical results, we must verify the same property experimentally. Hence, we give an open source prototype implementation of our system. Our implementation runs on a network with over 1000 node. Each node sends transactions to each other autonomously, which allows us to evaluate our analytical claims.

We begin this chapter with a description of the implementation in Section 5.1. Then, we move on to describing our experimental setup in Section 5.2 which includes a discussion on the system parameters and the physical infrastructure which we use. Finally, Section 5.3 and onwards follows the same structure as the Performance analysis (Section 4.2), where we analyse the performance experimentally rather than analytically and compare both results.

5.1 Implementation

The prototype implementation can be found on GitHub.

<https://github.com/kc1212/checo>

It implements the three protocols and the Extended TrustChain discussed in Chapter 3. We also implement two optimisations—privacy preserving validation protocol using compact blocks (Section 3.7.3) and optimised validation protocol using cached agreed fragments (Section 3.7.4). It is written in the event driven paradigm, using the Python programming language¹. We use the Twisted² library for networking.

The structure of the implementation is primarily made up of three modules—`acs`, `trustchain` and `node`. `acs`, as its name suggests, implements ACS.

¹<https://www.python.org/>

²<https://twistedmatrix.com/>

ACS uses erasure code in one of its sub-protocols (reliable broadcast). Thus we use the `liberasurecode`³ library for its Reed-Solomon error correcting code functionality. An implementation detail is that `liberasurecode` cannot create more than 32 code blocks, which is hardcoded in the source file⁴, we discuss the effect of this in Section 5.2. The `acs` module provides a small interface to the caller to start and stop the consensus process and also retrieve results. The `trustchain` module implements the Extended TrustChain data structure. It also provides the essential algorithm necessary to interact with Extended TrustChain such as `new_tx()`, `new_cp()` and `agreed_fragment()`. Finally, the `node` module ties everything together. It implements the consensus protocol, the transaction protocol and the validation protocol.

Every node keeps a persistent TCP connection with every other node. This creates a fully connected network for our experiment. It is certainly not ideal in real world scenarios where nodes may have limited resources (e.g. sockets). But as a prototype, it is sufficient to run a network of over a thousand nodes and experiment with it.

Finally, the cryptography primitives we use are SHA256 for hash functions and Ed25519 for digital signatures. Both of which are provided by `libnacl`⁵.

5.2 Experimental setup

The goal of the experiment is to run the three protocols—consensus protocol, transaction protocol and validation protocol—simultaneously and analyse the communication cost, the consensus duration and the global throughput. We investigate these properties under the following four parameters.

1. The transaction rate r_{tx} per node. This is not comparable to the others because it is fixed at 2 TX/s. Nevertheless, it is a good value because, as we show later, it hits a bottleneck in extreme cases which helps us understand the limitations of our design.
2. The number of facilitators $n \in \{4, 8, \dots, 32\}$. The maximum n is 32 because the limitation in `liberasurecode` mentioned in Section 5.1, but our results give a good indication of how our system may function for larger numbers of n .
3. The population size $N \in \{200, 300, \dots, 1200\}$. N stops at 1200 is due to our physical setup, which we describe next.

³<https://github.com/openstack/liberasurecode>

⁴<https://github.com/openstack/liberasurecode/blob/0794b31c623e4cede76d66be730719d24debcca9/include/erasurecode/erasurecode.h#L35>

⁵<https://pypi.python.org/pypi/libnacl>

4. The two modes of transaction. The first mode is the *fixed-neighbour* mode where nodes only transact with their immediate neighbour which is predetermined. This minimises the data volume per validated transaction because agreed fragment can be cached. The second mode is in the other extreme which we call the *random-neighbour* mode, where every transaction is with a random node out of the N nodes in the system. It is unlikely that the agreed fragments can be reused.

The experiment is run on the DAS-5⁶. From now on, we use “machines” to refer to DAS-5 nodes and “nodes” to refer to a running instance in our system. On DAS-5 we use up to 30 machines, for each machine we use up to 40 nodes. This gives us the aforementioned 1200 number. With this setup, we cannot run more nodes because the every machine only has 65535 ports available (minus the reserved ones). But 40 nodes each need 1200 TCP connections which is 48000 TCP connections per machine and that is inching close to the limit. While it is possible to have more TCP connections per machine, but it requires additional network interface which is something we do not control on the DAS-5. Nevertheless, running the system with 1200 nodes gives a good indication of its scalability properties as we show later.

To coordinate nodes on many different machines, we employ a discovery server to inform every node the IP addresses and port numbers of every other node. It is only run before the experiment and is not used during the experiment.

Finally, since Bitcoin transactions are approximately 500 bytes [47], we use a uniformly random transaction size sampled between 400 and 600 bytes.

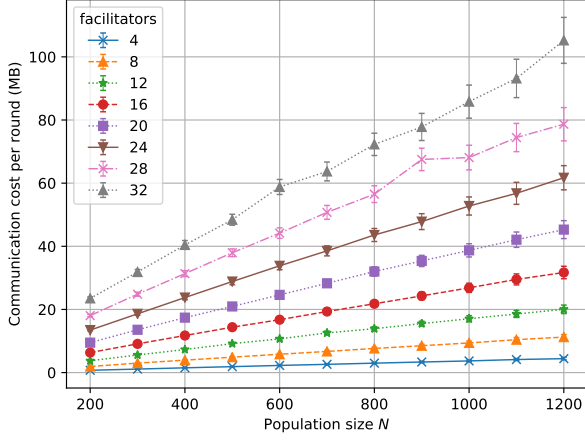
5.3 Communication cost for the consensus protocol

The remainder of this chapter follows the same structure as the performance analysis in Section 4.2. We check our analytical results experimentally and demonstrate horizontal scalability.

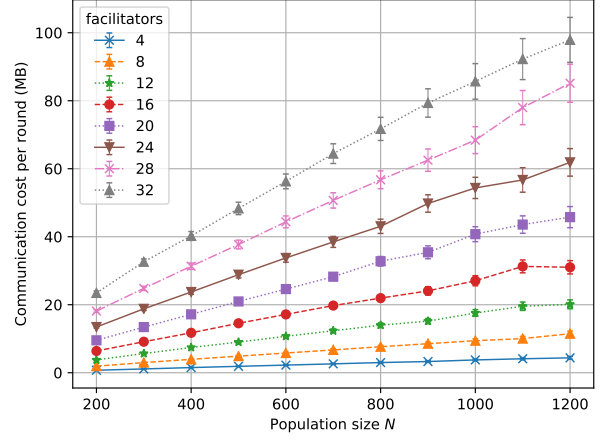
Figure 5.1 shows the relationship between the communication cost of the consensus protocol per round and the population size. The most important aspect is that these results show a linear increase. This reinforces our analytical result in Section 4.2.1. Note that regardless of whether the transactions are performed with a random neighbour or with a fixed neighbour, the magnitude of the communication cost is similar. Both peak at about 100 MB. This is expected because the consensus protocol is decoupled from the transaction protocol and the validation protocol. Finally, the rate for which the communication cost increases is higher when the number of facilitators is higher. This is also expected because the ACS algorithm has a polynomial term with respect to n in its communication complexity.

We are also interested in how communication costs translate to time. Hence, for the same experiment, we record the duration in seconds and the result is shown

⁶<https://www.cs.vu.nl/das5/>



(a) Transactions are with fixed neighbours.



(b) Transactions are with random neighbours.

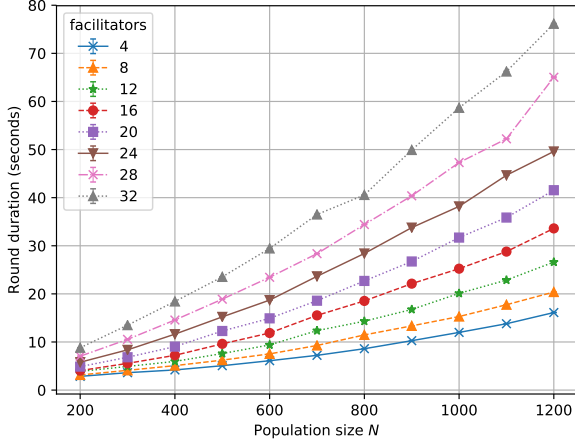
Figure 5.1: Communication cost for the consensus protocol per round increases linearly with population size. The error bars are larger for higher population size or higher number of facilitators is because rounds take longer thus they are repeated fewer times.

in Figure 5.2. Interestingly, the duration is not entirely linear. We attribute this behaviour to the extra time needed to hash the CP blocks in the consensus result to compute the luck value. Since if N increases, every node must also perform more hash operations. These results do not conform to analytical result in Section 4.2.2. Nevertheless, the difference is minor and there are ways to optimise the luck value computation. For example, the luck value can be computed by the facilitators and are sent with the consensus result. Then the non-facilitator nodes simply use it if there are enough signatures.

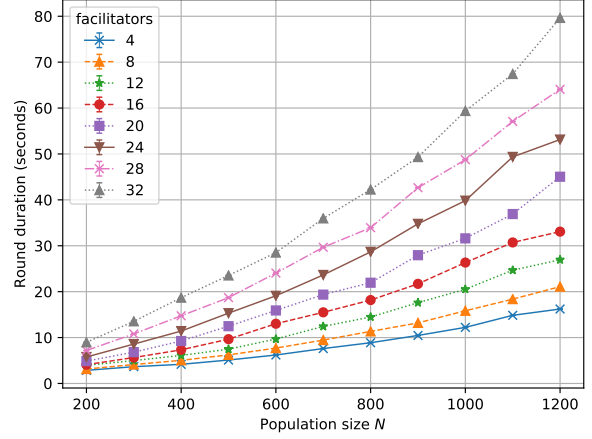
5.4 Communication cost for transaction and validation protocols

We argued that the communication cost per verified transaction is of $O(N)$ (Section 4.2.3). To verify the argument, we plot the relationship between the communication cost of for every validated transaction and population size in Figure 5.3. We observe a near linear relationship, which is due to the near linear relationship of the communication duration mentioned before. Again, we believe the difference is minor and it is possible to remove the extra overhead.

More interestingly, there is a large difference in communication cost between the two modes of transaction. When transacting with only one neighbour, the communication cost is low because only one agreed fragment needs to be communicated



(a) Transactions are with fixed neighbours.



(b) Transactions are with random neighbours.

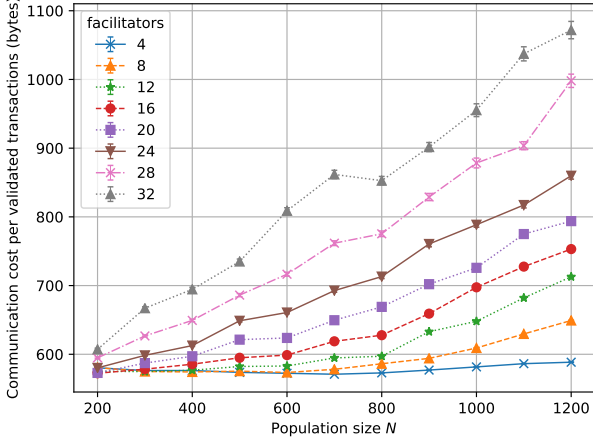
Figure 5.2: Round duration does not increase linearly with the population size. This is likely due to the additional hashing operation required for larger consensus result.

for every round in order to validate all transactions of that round. This is because agreed fragments are cached. On the other hand, if every node is transacting with a random node, then it is likely the case that one agreed fragment needs to be communicated for every transaction. Hence the communication cost we see in Figure 5.3b is much higher than in Figure 5.3a.

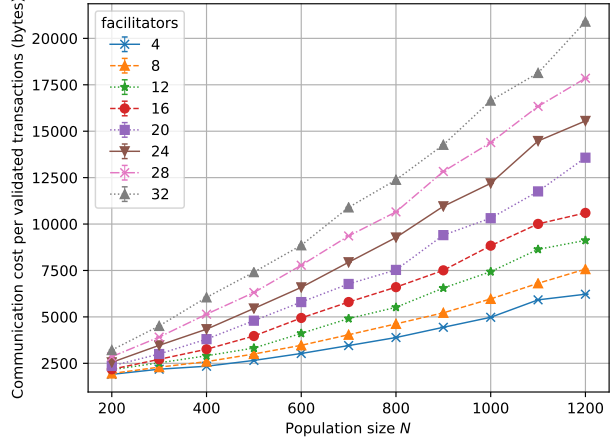
Some fluctuations exist in Figure 5.3a, this is due to our caching mechanism. We send validation requests at the same rate as transactions. Upon receiving a (remote) agreed fragment, the caching mechanism inspects all the transactions in the agreed fragment and attempts to verify as many as it can, rather than just the transaction in the original validation request. However, it may be the case that the agreed fragments arrive later than the validation request interval. Then it is possible to have sent two or more validation requests for some transactions in the same local agreed fragment. In this case, the remote would respond with two or more of the same agreed fragments, which results in extra (wasted) communication cost, and this is the source of the fluctuation seen in Figure 5.3a. The result in Figure 5.3b reinforces our argument. It is a lot more stable because for every transaction it is almost always the case that an agreed fragment is needed to validate it.

5.5 Linear global throughput

Finally, the global throughput results are shown in Figure 5.4. Evidently, the throughput has a linear relationship with the population size. This result is a strong indication of the horizontal scalability which we aimed to achieve. It also matches



(a) Transactions are with fixed neighbours.



(b) Transactions are with random neighbours.

Figure 5.3: Communication cost per verified transaction has similar (near linear) trend as Figure 5.2. Fluctuation for the fixed-neighbour mode exists because the cache mechanism is unpredictable.

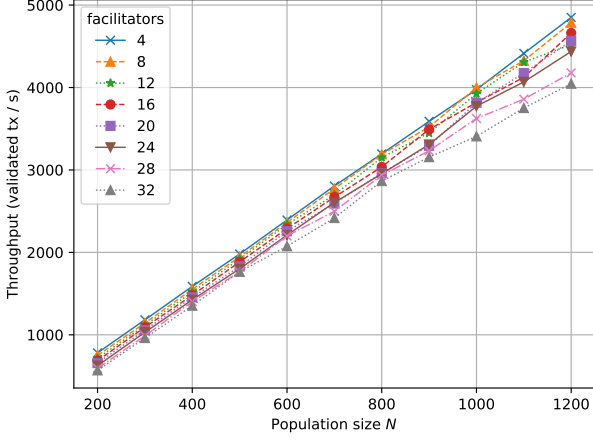
with our analytical result.

Note that the throughput decreases slightly as the number of facilitators increases. This is due to the additional communication cost for running ACS with a high number of facilitators. That is, if the network is congested then the nodes may not have enough bandwidth to send validation responses timely.

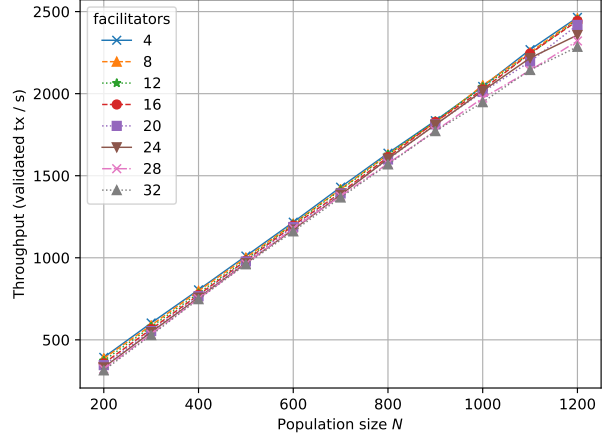
For Figure 5.4a, the magnitude of our throughput may not be self-evident at first glance. Recall that we fixed our r_{tx} to 2, but how is it possible to have around 4800 transactions per second for 1200 nodes (which is 4 TX/s)? This is due to the way validated transactions are calculated. Transactions are between two parties, hence if every node makes two transactions per second, every node also expects to receive two transactions per second. Hence, for every node, the TX blocks are created at 4 per second. Validation requests are sent at the same rate, which explains the magnitude.

The difference in magnitude between Figure 5.4a and Figure 5.4b is caused by the caching mechanism mentioned earlier. If a new agreed fragment needs to be transmitted to validate every transaction then it puts a toll on the network infrastructure. The low transaction rate in Figure 5.4b is caused by the fact that the network infrastructure cannot keep up with our demand. In practice, we do not expect such behaviour to occur as it is possible to cache agreed fragments.

We demonstrate the bottleneck issue from a different perspective in Figure 5.5. The graph is plotted by counting the number of transactions and the number of validated transactions every 5 seconds for one node running in a network of 1200 nodes and 32 facilitators. In Figure 5.5a, the number of validated transaction changes as



(a) Transactions are with fixed neighbours.



(b) Transactions are with random neighbours.

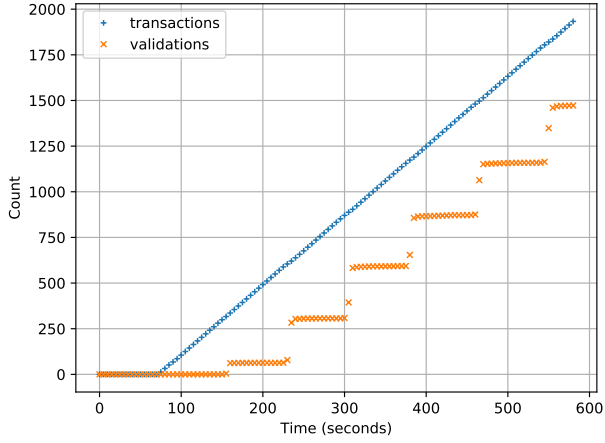
Figure 5.4: Global throughput increases as the population increases when every node transact at the same rate. Using fixed neighbours results in a higher throughput because of the caching mechanism.

a step function. This means that transactions are validated in bursts, and the validation protocol can “keep up” with the transactions. Note that the horizontal “lines” where no new validated transactions are made are on average 76 seconds, this matches with the round duration result in Figure 5.2a. On the other hand in Figure 5.5b, the validation protocol clearly cannot “keep up” with the rate which the transactions are made. As a result, the global throughput is lower when transacting with random nodes than only with neighbours.

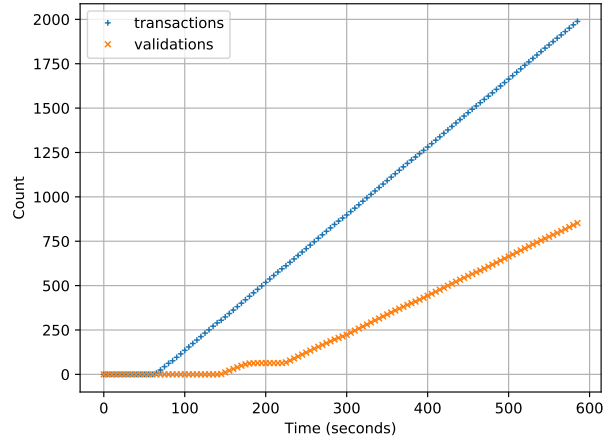
5.6 Communication cost with varying number of facilitators

Up to this point we focused on the effect of communication cost, throughput and so on with respect to the population size. In this section, we consider a varying number of facilitators, which gives us an insight into our system performance may perform when the number of facilitators is higher than 32.

Figure 5.6 shows the communication cost of the consensus protocol for varying numbers of facilitators. There is strong evidence that the communication cost grows polynomially. We expect this because of there are polynomial terms in the ACS communication complexity— $O(n^2|v| + \lambda n^3 \log n)$. This also means that the rounds would take longer to complete and transactions would take longer to verify. On the other hand, we get better fault tolerance. Thus a linear increase in fault tolerance (t) costs a polynomial increase in communication cost.

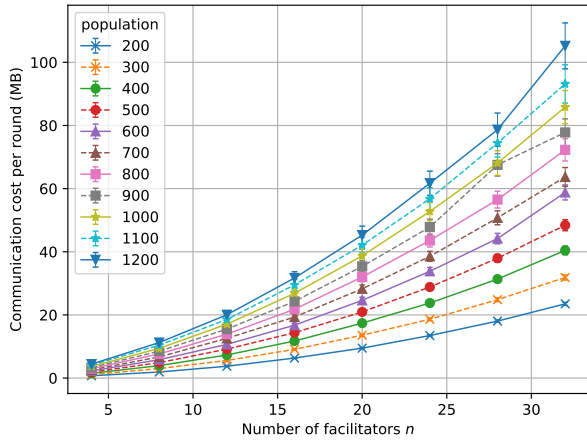


(a) Transactions are with fixed neighbours.

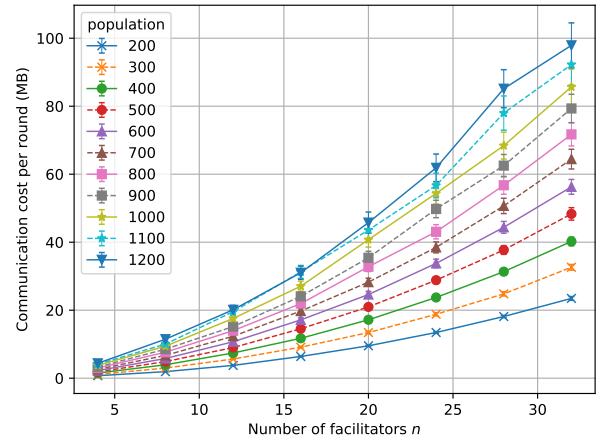


(b) Transactions are with random neighbours.

Figure 5.5: A limitation of our system is when nodes are transacting with many random nodes, then the network cannot keep up with the large number of agreed fragments that need to be communicated between nodes. Hence the slope of validated transactions grows at a slower rate in Figure 5.5b.



(a) Transactions are with fixed neighbours.



(b) Transactions are with random neighbours.

Figure 5.6: The communication cost of the consensus protocol increases polynomially with respect to the number of facilitators as expected from the ACS communication complexity.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In this work we introduced an application neutral blockchain system which we call CHECO. We add checkpoint block to the existing TrustChain data structure for use in our consensus protocol. The round based consensus protocol uses ACS as a building block to reach consensus on checkpoint blocks. The consensus result, which is a set of checkpoint blocks, lets nodes elect new facilitators and create new checkpoint blocks. To make transactions, nodes use the transaction protocol, which is adapted from an existing work called True Halves. Finally, we introduce a validation protocol which ensures that if agreed fragments for some transaction exists, then nodes reach agreement on the validity of that transaction. The novelty of the validation protocol is that it uses point-to-point communication, i.e. nodes only validate the transactions of interest, this enables our horizontal scalability property.

The research question we asked in Chapter 2 is the following.

Is it possible to design a blockchain consensus protocol that is fault tolerant, scalable and can reach global consensus?

We answer it in the affirmative. Fault tolerance is guaranteed if $n \geq 3t + 1$ by using ACS as a building block. While t may be small compared to the population size N , we show that the probability for the system to fail is low even when $n \geq 3t + 1$ does not hold as long as the proportion of malicious nodes is not close to a third of N . For example, if there the population size is 1000 and 20% of the nodes are malicious, the probability for a round to potentially fail is bounded below 2.6×10^{-16} . This probability bound would decrease as the population size increases. Horizontal scalability property is demonstrated both analytically and experimentally. Unlike sharding protocols, the property holds regardless of transaction characteristics and needs no parameter selection. Finally, we achieve global consensus on transactions via consensus on checkpoint blocks.

This work is the first step in building a new paradigm for blockchain consensus protocol. It has the potential to efficiently cultivate trust on the internet in the presence of faults without a central authority. We hope to improve our design by building a concrete application on top of it.

6.1 Future work

While our system has excellent scalability properties, it is not without limitations. Much of it is from the fact that it does not have a concrete application. We do not attempt to prevent the Sybil attack, spam or DoS because the accuracy of the defence depends on the understanding of the application. For instance, without any application, it would be impossible to distinguish between a very active node from a spammer because the content of the transaction (m) carry no meaning.

Our experiment is carried out in a somewhat idealised world (DAS-5). We hope to experiment our prototype in a more realistic environment. For example, DeterLab [51] lets users simulate network delay, which is important for discovering issue that may only occur in hostile environments. To understand our system further, we hope to experiment with a real platform with real users such as Tribler [36]. For instance, the TrustChain in Tribler stores the number of bytes uploaded and downloaded between users, but it has no global consensus. It would be useful to integrate our consensus protocol into Tribler to prevent misreporting attacks. More importantly, it gives us an opportunity to observe the characteristics of our system in the real world and how it evolves with new features or alterations.

The fault tolerance property is adequate for permissioned systems where nodes have relatively more trust between each other. However, it is not adequate for permissionless systems, which usually aim to tolerate fault that involve a minority of the network, which can be just shy of 50%. For future work, we propose the following two ways to improve fault tolerance. First, use a reputation mechanism to select facilitators rather than simply selecting them randomly so that faulty nodes are less likely to be selected. This technique of course heavily depends on the application, for P2P file sharing systems the reputation score may be the number of bytes contributed to the network. Second, instead of using ACS we use a proof-of-stake (PoS) scheme which means that nodes with more stake in the system get more vote. In an ideal PoS scheme, the system can tolerate any fault if the majority of the stake holders are honest.

Finally, as mentioned in Section 3.7.2, we wish to evaluate our system (analytically and experimentally) in the permissionless settings. This would enable our protocol to be applied to a much wider range of applications.

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Appendix A

Consensus protocol example

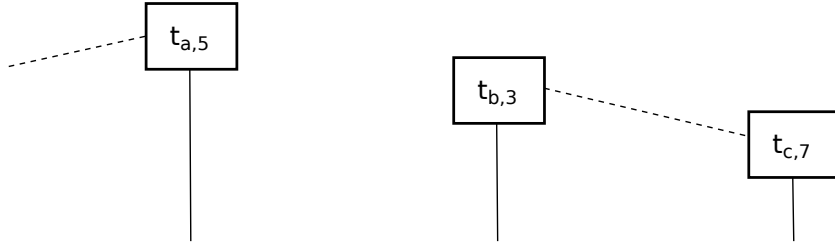


Figure A.1: We begin in a state where some facilitators \mathcal{F}_{r-2} just agreed on the consensus result \mathcal{C}_{r-1} but have not yet propagated it yet.

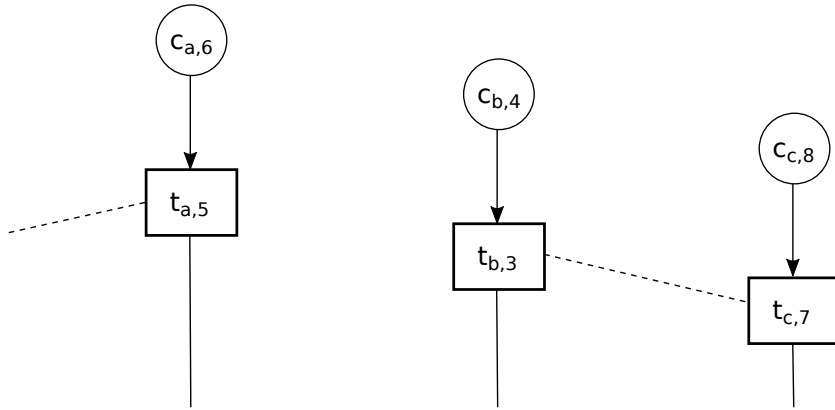


Figure A.2: The facilitators propagate \mathcal{C}_{r-1} . Upon receiving it, the nodes perform two tasks; (1) elect new facilitators \mathcal{F}_{r-1} by selecting the first n nodes ordered by $H(\mathcal{C}_{r-1} || pk)$, and (2) create new CP blocks— $c_{a,6}$, $c_{b,4}$ and $c_{c,8}$. $H(\cdot)$ is a cryptographically secure hash function and pk is the public key of the respective node.

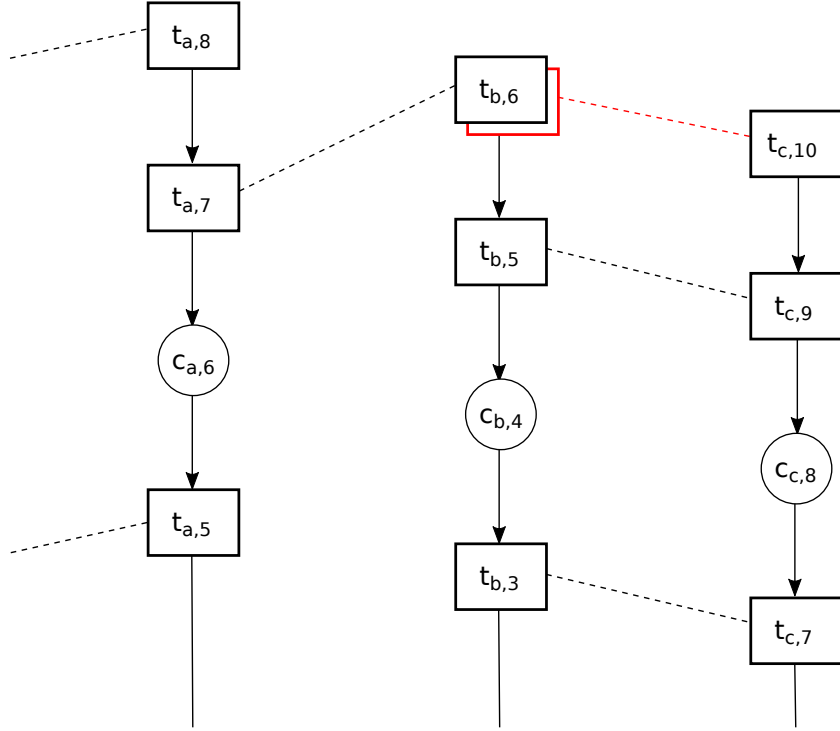


Figure A.3: Nodes now send their new CP blocks to the new facilitators \mathcal{F}_{r-1} . While \mathcal{F}_{r-1} is trying to reach consensus on a set of CP blocks, nodes carry on making transactions as usual (concurrently). We remark that the to-be-agreed consensus result \mathcal{C}_r is created using CP blocks from the previous round— $c_{a,6}$, $c_{b,4}$ and $c_{c,8}$.

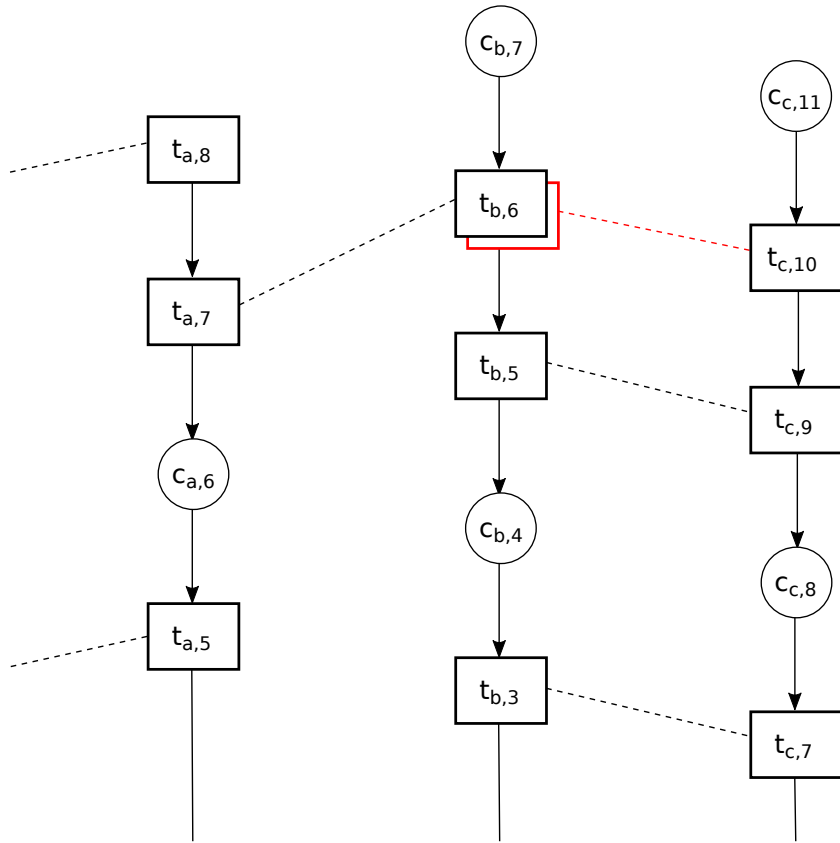


Figure A.4: Finally, when \mathcal{F}_{r-1} decides on \mathcal{C}_r (which should contain $c_{a,6}$, $c_{b,4}$ and $c_{c,8}$) and disseminates it. Nodes compute new facilitators \mathcal{F}_r and create new CP blocks.

