

Key Management in Bitcoin: Meet the new paradigm, same as the old paradigm

Position Paper

Jeremy Clark
Carleton University
clark@scs.carleton.ca

David Barrera
Carleton University
dbarrera@ccsl.carleton.ca

ABSTRACT

We don't know if Bitcoin millionaires sleep at night, only that they shouldn't. The average user is not prepared to securely manage a large amount of Bitcoins. This is due, in large part, to Bitcoin's use of public key cryptography which forces every one of its users into the unfamiliar territory of key management. We expect this to prevent Bitcoin from gaining traction beyond its enthusiasts. In this paper, we review the state of the art in Bitcoin key management tools, with particular focus on attempts to emulate the functionality of a password-based system within Bitcoin. Each approach presents trade-offs in security, usability and availability that lead us to conclude none is a silver bullet and the area deserves further attention. We thus propose a research agenda of possible future directions in improving key management techniques for Bitcoin users in the short- and medium-term.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.4 [Electronic Commerce]: Cybercash, digital cash;
K.6.5 [Security and Protection]: Unauthorized access

General Terms

Security, Human Factors

Keywords

Key Management, Bitcoin, Usability

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

- Different paradigm: protecting a key vs protecting a password. Bitcoins are secured to their owners by the private key of the address that the bitcoins are stored in. This private keys are not a key or password that the user knows the value so the normal user might not have any ideas about how this works and might lose the private key by simple mistakes
- Thesis: users aren't ready to manage keys.

- State of the art in terms of usability is to somehow convert the key into a password
- security and deployability (availability) problems
- keys=something you have.

Due to the meteoritic rise in Bitcoin's exchange rate, users are coming to the realization that it is no longer a crypto plaything; it is actual money.

We are not arguing that it will hinder adoption, as users will not realize what they are getting into. Rather it will harm traction, since users won't stick around to get fooled twice.

"Fool me once, shame on... shame on you. Fool me... you can't get fooled again." -W

Scope: bitcoin can be split into 3 parts: buying bitcoins (involving exchanges, OTC, etc), holding bitcoins (involving wallets, keys, etc), and spending bitcoins (creating transactions, waiting for verifications, etc). this paper focuses on the middle point.

2. PRELIMINARIES

2.1 Bitcoin Background

2.2 Other PKI-based Systems

- Same paradigm
- SSH - nerds
- PGP - turbo nerds
- SSL - client certs (no one, or spooks)
- SSL - server

3. BENEFITS

In this paper, we evaluate different approaches to secure and use bitcoins (Key management techniques). Our approach is by defining the benefits that the user would get by using each application in the manner of usability and security. Some benefits might not inclusively be in usability category or security, thus our categorization is not completely error prone, however it is, by the time of the writing, the most comprehensive study in this subject. The result of this evaluation is in Table 11. There are three different scores for each technique:

- Full score
- Half Score - Not the full score but has some features related to the evaluated benefit

No circle - no score at all, either not applicable or does not have any feature for the evaluated benefit

3.1 Usability Benefits

3.1.1 Resilient to Equipment Failure

Keys are stored in `wallet.dat` or other wallet file formats. With hard disk failure or any relevant equipment failure that prevents the user to access this file, the keys and thus the bitcoins stored in it would be unusable.

3.1.2 Compatible with Change Keys

User can send the bitcoins from one address to the other, in this way the key that stores the bitcoins would be changed. In some approaches this might be a hard task to do, but in default client it would be as simple as a transaction.

3.1.3 Immediate Access

With the increasing size of the blockchain having access to the bitcoins and the ability to do transactions gets more important everyday. The user should get access to the up-to-date synced blockchain to be able to see his full amount of bitcoins to the date.

3.1.4 No New Software

Some approaches would need a new software to be installed on the system for the user to be able to access his funds or do transactions.

3.1.5 Portable

Portability in this case means the access to the funds from different resources or places, either it's a new computer or different computer in a different location.

3.2 Security Benefits

3.2.1 Malware Resistant

The value of bitcoins has increased in the past months and there has been malwares that focus on stealing keys¹. The ability to resist these kind of malwares and attacks is a viral feature of the key management techniques.

3.2.2 Key Kept Offline

One way to secure the keys is to keep them offline, whether in a usb drive disconnected from the internet or cold storages. There are also methods to keep the keys in two parts, that both factors should be online for the user to be able to do a transaction.

3.2.3 No Trusted Third Party

By trusting a third party, there would be another place that the keys are stored and this would be a security risk if the party is compromised.

¹<http://www.zdnet.com/blog/security/new-bitcoin-malware-steals-bitcoin-wallets-infostealer-coinbit/8804>

3.2.4 Resistant to Physical Theft

On the event that the hardware containing the keys is stolen, the thief can access the keys if they are not securely stored, such as strong encryption.

3.2.5 Resistant to Physical Observation

Evesdropping is not applicable on the keys stored in the file but with the new approaches different ways of physical observation could be used to get the keys.

3.2.6 Resilient to Password Loss

Password loss usually is handled by the service provider and either there would be a password reset option or not. On cases that there is no user provider or third party to do so, it is only the key management techniques toward this issue

4. BITCOIN PRIVATE KEY MANAGEMENT

At the core of Bitcoin's functionality are keypairs. The public key allows users to receive coins and check their wallet balance, and the private key allows users to send coins to other addresses. In this Section, we review the main mechanisms used in the current Bitcoin ecosystem to manage these keys.

4.1 Default Client

On first launch, the official `bitcoin-qt` client creates a `wallet.dat` file in the Bitcoin data directory (usually a hidden folder inside the user's application folder). The `wallet.dat` file contains the set of all private keys belonging to the user, allowing the user to sign transactions (*i.e.*, send coins). Anyone with access to the private keys inside `wallet.dat` can spend the coins associated with those keys. Thus, access control on the `wallet.dat` file is extremely important.

The `wallet.dat` file can be read by any application with access to the user's application folder. Malware is a particularly noteworthy example here, since theft of the `wallet.dat` file by a malicious developer results in immediate access to the victim's funds. In 2011, Symantec discovered the *Infostealer.Coinbit*² malware, which targeted Windows systems in an attempt to find `wallet.dat` files and sent them via email to the attacker.

Unintentional sharing of the `wallet.dat` file is also a concern in the default client. Users must be cautious to not inadvertently share their bitcoin application folder on the Internet or to a location outside of the user's control. Possible sharing includes peer to peer (P2P) file-sharing networks, off-site backups, or shared network drive. Physical theft of the system hosting the `wallet.dat` file is also a concern, especially in the case of portable computers. Although it is possible to encrypt `wallet.dat` with a custom password.

By keeping the `wallet.dat` file locally, users must also be wary of *threats to digital preservation* [?] such as general equipment failure due to natural disasters and electrical failures; acts of war; mistaken erasure (*e.g.*, formatting the wrong drive or deleting the wrong folder); bit rot (*i.e.*, undetected storage failure); and possibly others.

²http://www.symantec.com/security_response/writeup.jsp?docid=2011-061615-3651-99

	Malware Resistant	Key Kept Offline	No Trusted Third Party	Resistant to Physical Theft	Resilient to Physical Observation	Resilient to Equipment Failure	Compatible with Change	Immediate Access	No New Software	Portable	Blank	Blank	Blank
Traditional cash	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
Key in file (default)		•		•	•	•	•	•					
Password-protected	○	○	•	○	•		•	•	•				
Air gap	○	•	•	•	•	•							
Hardware Security Module		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
Physical Wallet	•	•	•		•	•					•		
Password-derived key	○	•	•	○	•		•			•			
Hosted (hot)					○	○	•	•	•	•			
Hosted (cold)	○	•			○	○	•		•	•			

Table 1: A Comparison of Key Management Techniques for Bitcoin.

Advantages of using the `bitcoin-qt` client in it's default configuration no trust needed in a third party, and no need to recall yet another password. Additionally, the user can spend coins and receive change without the need to perform extra steps (see Section 4.4).

One of the disadvantages of using `bitcoin-qt` is with the increase size of blockchain (*Should explain blockchain in Bitcoin background section*) it takes up storage space on the user's computer. On the time of writing this paper it uses around 13 gigabytes³ for storing blockchain. Also for new `bitcoin-qt`'s users it might take days to synchronize their local copy of blockchain.

To score the `bitcoin-qt` it does not have malware resistant nor keep keys offline, there is no need for third party trust ad nothing to be physically observed. It is not resistant to physical theft nor equipment failure cause the keys would be lost in either way. On password loss, there are no ways to reset the password so resilient to password loss, however password is not set by default and should be enabled by the user. Due to huge size of blockchain it has somehow the immediate access score and non in portability, also there is no need to for any new software and it is compatible with change keys as it would be just a transaction to a new address.

4.2 Simplified Payment Verification (SPV)

It is possible not store all the block-chain and verify everything but to connect to an arbitrary full node and download only the block headers. This would resolve the storage and synching problem `bitcoin-qt`'s are facing now.

`bitcoinj`⁴ is an implementation of SPV. `MultiBit`⁵ is a bitcoin wallet that uses this feature. `MultiBit` is an open-source wallet with the intention to be fast and easy to use, it also keep its wallet file encrypted. SPV is more a technique to sync blockchain with the client, however because there are some clients different than the `bitcoin-qt` that uses SPV and have some different features with include this in our evaluation. These clients are a new software to be installed, however they could be installed on a usb key to be used on any system (same operating systems) so they are partly portable and keys could be kept offline. Even though they are stand alone applications they trust their provider's nodes for the blockchain headers, albeit the attack or fake transactions on this level due to specific features of SPV protocol is really unlikely it gets the half score. Other benefits are as the same as the default client.

4.3 Password-protected Wallet

TO BE REMOVED ?

Some Bitcoin clients allow wallets (specifically the private keys in the wallet) to be encrypted with a user-chosen password. This would be good for a stolen wallet file but still malwares could use keyloggers or other method to get the password. Also users might think that the password is applicable for their bitcoins in every client, like a password for an online wallet, however it's more of a two factor key to get to the funds. By forgetting the password, there might not be any solutions to recover the lost bitcoins, although there are services available to bruteforce the password only feasible depending on the complexity of the password⁶.

4.4 Offline Storage

⁴<https://code.google.com/p/bitcoinj/>

⁵<http://multibit.org>

⁶<http://www.walletrecoveryservices.com>

³<https://blockchain.info/charts/blocks-size>

The most secure way to save the private keys from being stolen is to have them disconnected from the internet, although it has drawbacks of not available to send the funds immediately. Offline storage don't have the Immediate access benefit.

Paper Wallets are just a print out of the private keys, there are designs to keep it more secure but in the end whoever has the paper in hand can spend the bitcoins.⁷

, thus no resistant to physical observation but no need to trust any third parties. It is also possible to put the wallet file into a usb and keep it in a safe offline place that also needs to be physically secure and also a longer procedure to import the keys into a wallet and spend the bitcoins, also vulnerable to malwares and need new softwares for the import process. There has not been a Hardware wallet in production yet, but TREZOR⁸ has promised a full functional and secure hardware wallet for bitcoin, it is a plug and play USB key that offers transaction signing for the common wallets on the computer without revealing the private keys. If the paper wallets tear off or the hardware wallets fail or even if the password for the encryption is lost, the keys would could not be retrieved thus resilient to equipment failure and password loss applies. although these methods are pretty portable, Changing keys due to the hard-coded-like keys needs to generate new keys and redo all the necessary work to get the new keys in proper formats.

4.5 Mobile Wallets

Bitcoin-wallet⁹ is a Bitcoin wallet for Android and Black-Berry OS. It uses SPV to take less storage for the blockchain and it's completely peer-to-peer and does not use It uses a custom format for wallets which should be compatible between clients using bitcoinj and also possible to backup the wallet.

Mycelium Bitcoin Wallet for Android¹⁰ is another bitcoin wallet for mobile devices. It uses SPV for block-chain synchronization, has the ability to import private keys for secure cold-storage integration and it's possible to export the keys to external storage of the device.

However having the wallet file in a mobile device always has the cut back of losing your wallet when the device is stolen. Mobile wallets in the matter of evaluation do not differ from wallets, but may have more vulnerability to physical theft.

5. MANAGING WITH A PASSWORD

cf. online banking (cormac herley).

5.1 Password-Derived Key

- entropy reduction
- salt, iteration count
- parsing (spec that was followed) requires a tool. if you lose the tool, you may not be able to recover your keys. standard may not be detailed enough, or not properly implemented.
- change accounts gets messy

⁷<https://bitcoinpaperwallet.com>

⁸<http://www.bitcointrezor.com>

⁹<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=de.schildbach.wallet>

¹⁰<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.mycelium.wallet>

5.2 Hosted (Hot Storage)

One easier way to manage your bitcoin wallet is by using on-line wallets. It has it's own advantages and cutbacks. Trusting third party is one issue and the party getting hacked is another. There has been known trustable third parties that just went out of business on their first big hacks, such as instawallet¹¹, Bitcoinica¹², etc. Bitcoinica in 2012 lost more than 60,000 bitcoins due to two successful attacks.

In the time of writing this paper the most popular online wallet is blockchain.info¹³ that offers two-factor authentication via email verification, but resistant to forgetting the password.

These online services might shutdown due to legal implications or attacks, Also the user might be tricked to reveal his password on a phishing attack¹⁴, thus these services are not resistant to physical observation. In short, Hosted (Hot) wallets are not malware resistant nor keep the keys offline, also there is the need of trust and also it is not resistant to physical theft, however because of the usual backup of such services it is resilient to equipment failure. They might offer password reset options to recover the lost password. Compatibility with change keys is as easy as doing a transaction to the new account and they offer immediate access to the funds as they are online services and synced with block chain and usually accessible through a browser thus portable and no need for a new software.

5.3 Hosted (Cold Storage)

It is possible to apply the offline storage method to hosted wallets but there are more drawbacks than benefits, not assuming security as the only measure. coinbase announced that more than 87% of it's users bitcoins are stored in cold storage¹⁵. It would be secure for most uses but if the total withdrawal in a period of time becomes greater than the funds available in online storage there would be a 48 hours delay on the payments, for scoring purpose we assume this service is fully implemented in cold storage and there is no bitcoins in hot storage of the service. With keys being offline, it would have resistance toward malwares but no immediate access to the funds, however the user should trust the third party service. The rest of the benefits are the same as hosted on online storage.

6. A RESEARCH AGENDA

- better import/export of keys
- better language and guidance on key management
- how do you know the key is in wallet.dat ?
- How do you know if a file has been read? Specifically, how do you know if your private key file has been read by an app other than your wallet? We have unix `atime`

¹¹<http://www.theverge.com/2013/4/3/4180020/bitcoin-service-instawallet-suspended-indefinitely-after-hack>

¹²<http://www.theverge.com/2012/8/10/3233711/second-bitcoin-lawsuit-is-filed-in-california>

¹³<https://blockchain.info/wallet>

¹⁴<http://www.theverge.com/2013/4/5/4186808/bitcoin-banker-coinbase-phishing-attacks-user-information-leaked>

¹⁵<http://blog.coinbase.com/post/33197656699/coinbase-now-storing-87-of-customer-funds-offline>

(time of last access), but we can't log what process read the file.

- publishing public keys. people need to keep these around, and they can use to check if they have the right privkey.
- if you have your pubkey and you have the salt, you can avoid rainbow tables, but your pubkeys get longer. (add salt via commitcoin)
- boyen iterated hashing of passwords -> compute amount of iterations based on money, script
- digital death
- sinkhole accounts
- incentives are there because it's money. not like ssh or ssl.
- min password entropy as a function of how much money its protecting: examine in terms of falling cost to brute force (e.g. w/ EC2), vs rising price of bit coins. -> future proof against lowering EC2 costs and raising bitcoin costs
- bitbills, oblivious printing and other physically intuitive media that can behave (sort of) like cash
- theft/loss mitigation, making it easier to split wallets to mitigate loss
- account rollover vs. password changes
- graphical passwords
- security of RNGs. i read that vanitygen (for making vanity bitcoin addresses) uses OpenSSL's RNG and it's secure because it's "used on thousands of websites".
- air gap -> how good is it?

7. RELATED WORK

Blah blah blah.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we have ...