

CSE5095-010: Blockchain Technology

Lecture 9

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Outline

- Mining and consensus algorithms/protocols.
 - Proof-of-stake.
 - Proof-of-space/storage.
 - Proof-of-elapsed time.
 - Byzantine fault tolerant.
 - Hybrid mining algorithms.

Why Proof-of-Work?

- Defending against Sybil attacks.
 - Creating fake identities is expensive; fake miner with no resources (computation, bandwidth, etc.) cannot participate in adding blocks to the blockchain.
- Securing the blockchain.
 - Expensive to rewrite or alter the history.
- Providing a natural way of distributing block generation among miners in a random way.
 - I.e., selecting the round leader in a randomized way.
- Implicitly synchronizing network operation.
 - The difficulty of the mining puzzle controls the average block generation rate.

Proof-of-Work is Unuseful

- Miners do repeated hashing process that is not useful for anything beyond mining a new block.
- Is not this a **computation waste** (which is translated into resource waste)?
 - In 2014, researchers showed that **electricity consumption** of Bitcoin mining is comparable to some developed countries electricity consumption.
 - Mining is not for free: requires advanced hardware, cooling systems, huge electricity bills, maintenance cost, etc.
- Can we use other forms of resources (storage, bandwidth, etc.) to have a useful mining process?
- Can we reduce the electricity consumption of the mining process?

Proof-of-Work - More Issues

- How about ***transaction throughput***?
 - Can cryptocurrencies replace other, high throughput, payment systems anytime soon?
- How long does it take to ***confirm a transaction***?
 - The recent history of the blockchain may have several, temporary, versions. Several blocks could be mined at the same time.
 - How about applications that require instant settlement, can they afford waiting for an hour or so for a transaction to be confirmed?
- How about ***wealth distribution***? Does the mining process make the wealthy wealthier?
- Not to mention the ***tendency toward centralization*** due to the concept of centralized mining pools.

Potential Solutions

- Several mining algorithms were proposed to optimize the following:
 - Resource consumption, e.g., proof-of-stake.
 - Usefulness, e.g., proof-of-storage.
 - Throughput and confirmation time, e.g., Fault Tolerant Byzantine Agreement based protocols.
- Some systems adopted hybrid solutions that combine several protocols at the same time.

Proof-of-Stake

- Goal: reduce resources consumption.
 - Leader election is based on the amount of currency, or stake, a miner owns.
 - The leader is elected first, then mining takes place (opposite order compared to proof-of-work).
- Mining a block requires only validating transactions and add them to a block, the sign this block.
 - No extensive computations are needed, which saves both hardware cost and electricity.

PoS - General Mechanism

- At the beginning of each round (i.e., period during which a new block need to be mined):
 - Define the set of miners and the stake share of each one of them.
 - Randomly select a miner to be the round leader.
 - Each miner will be selected with a probability proportional to the amount of currency it stakes in the system.
 - Mine a block by forming a candidate block (containing a set of valid transactions), signing this block, and then announcing it to the network.
- Other miners accept the block if it is valid and created by an elected leader (requires a proof of leader election).

PoS - Leader Election I

- Through a randomized, unpredictable process, which requires a cryptographic lottery.
- The i th miner will be selected with a probability $p_i = s_i / \sum s_i$ for all i .
- Several lottery implementations, examples:
 - MPC based coin flipping protocol, used in Ouroboros [Kiayias et al., 2017], a simplified version works as follows:
 - A subset of stakeholders (miners) run this protocol to generate a random seed.
 - Feed this seed to a PRF that will sample a biased coin for each miner (with probability p_i sample 1, with probability $1-p_i$ sample 0). Stop when 1 is sampled.
 - The random seed is also used to sample the subset of stakeholders for the next round.

PoS - Leader Election II

- Several lottery implementations, examples:
 - Verifiable random function (VRF)-based, used in Algorand [Gilad et al., 2017].
 - A random public seed is selected per round.
 - Used as input for the VRF which determines if a user has been selected as a leader based on his/her stake value.
 - The VRF requires a secret key; hence, can produce the output hash other than the key owner.
 - A proof is produced to verify in zero knowledge (without revealing the secret key) that the hash output is correct.
- Depending on the protocol, a set of block proposers (potential leaders) is selected, then a consensus protocol is run to select one block as winner (and a winner leader).

PoS - Issues I

- Initial stake distribution.
 - How to distribute the currency among the miners to have stake and participate in mining?
 - Several options, starts with PoW and then switch to pure PoS. Or have a stake allocation phase during which miners can buy coins.
- DoS.
 - If leader election is public, attackers may attack the leader to prevent mining a new block.
 - Potential solutions: implement a private leader election process, leader is know after announcing a block. Or elect several leaders per round.

PoS - Issues II

- Nothing-at-stake attack.
 - A miner, once it is selected as the round leader, may extend several forks at the same time.
 - Mining a block on each branch requires only a signature!
 - Even worse, the leaders of the past rounds may collude to rewrite the blocks they mined as they want.
 - Proposed solutions:
 - Financial punishments (the miner who is detected doing this attack will lose its stake).
 - Checkpoints to prevent rewriting the chain by colluding miners.
 - Eliminate forks in the systems (a fork is created with a negligible probability).

PoS - Issues III

- Wealth distribution.
 - The miner with the highest stake will be selected more frequently to mine new blocks, and hence, collect mining rewards.
 - The wealthy becomes wealthier.
 - This makes 51% attack easier.
 - Potential solutions: selecting an appropriate mining reward function to smooth out wealth distribution, develop leader election algorithms that exclude recently selected miners, etc.

Useful Mining

- Many flavors, with the goal of building a mining process with useful outcome.
- Usually relies on utilizing the miners to provide a distributed service.
 - Such as storage service of archival data, content distribution, computation outsourcing, etc.
- The probability of selecting a miner as a round leader is tied to the amount of service a miner puts in the system.
- Several challenges:
 - How to prove that a miner provided a correct service?
 - Requires deploying additional protocols to produce such proofs.
 - How to use this knowledge to select the round leader?
 - Similar approaches to proof-of-stake can be used).

Proof-of-Space/Storage

- Miners store files for others, prove periodically that they still hold the file.
 - Examples: Spacemint, PermaCoin.
- The larger the dedicated storage space, the higher the probability of being selected as a leader.
- Some systems expanded this to create a storage market; beside collecting mining rewards, miners are paid for the storage by the customers.
 - E.g., Filecoin.

Proof-of-Storage Issues I

- Cryptographic proofs for storing files:
 - proof-of-space [Dziembowski et al., 2015],
 - proof-of-spacetime [Moran et al., 2016],
 - proof-of-retrievability [Miller et al., 2014].
- Mainly take the form of a challenge/response approach, which needs to be implemented in a non-interactive way.
- Usually a miner will put some stake, like a penalty deposit, in order to participate.
 - If not proofs are submitted, part of this deposit is revoked, this besides not being paid by the customer (if such payments are involved).
 - How to determine the value of the financial punishment?

Proof-of-Storage Issues II

- Several concerns:
 - Trade-off between computation/storage [Moran et al., 2016].
 - Either generate a file on the fly or have it already stored.
 - The construction is about a randomly generated file; is this particularly useful?
 - Outsourcing; store files somewhere else and retrieve when needed.
 - Adding timing bound on a miner's response could be useful in this case.
 - Claim to store several copies of a file.
 - For redundancy reasons, one may ask for storing several copies of a file.
 - Proof-of-replication (a modified version of proof-of-storage) are used to mitigate this issue, e.g., used in Filecoin.

Proof-of-Elapsed Time

- Relies on secure hardware.
- Two main flavors:
 - Each miner requests a wait time from its enclave, the miner with the shortest wait time will be the round leader.
 - A variant of useful proof-of-work.
 - The enclaves execute some useful computation.
 - Each instruction cycle is treated as a lottery ticket. If it wins, the enclave owner, i.e., the miner, is authorized to mint a new block.
- In both an irrefutable proof must be provided attesting that a miner has indeed won the round.

Proof-of-Elapsed Time Issues

- Requires trusting the secure hardware manufacturer.
- Breaking one machine allows the attacker to always win the race and be the leader of every round.
- An attacker may purchase several chips and run the mining on all of them concurrently, use the results of the winning chip.
 - Called stale chip problem.
 - Could be mitigated by a careful configuration of incentives in the system.

Byzantine Agreement Based I

- Or Byzantine Fault Tolerant (BFT)-based consensus.
- Goal: “Agree faster.”
 - speed up transaction confirmation, increase throughput, reduce the probability of forking the blockchain.
- Based on the classic Byzantine general problem in distributed systems.
 - The failure of one or more components prevents the system from reaching consensus.
- It was shown that a system of $3t+1$ parties can tolerate up to t failures, and hence, reach consensus.
- The Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance (PBFT) algorithm [Castro et al., 1999] was the first efficient solution that works in weakly synchronous environments such as the Internet.

Byzantine Agreement Based II

- For each round, a committee will be elected to decide the next mined block through a PBFT protocol.
- Committee election could be based on the previous algorithms we studied:
 - Based on PoW, Byzcoin [Kogias et al., 2016].
 - Will explore it in details to get sense of how BFT-based consensus works.
 - Based on PoS and VRFs, Algorand [Gilad et al., 2017].
- Testing results showed that transactions are confirmed in less than a minute in the above protocols.

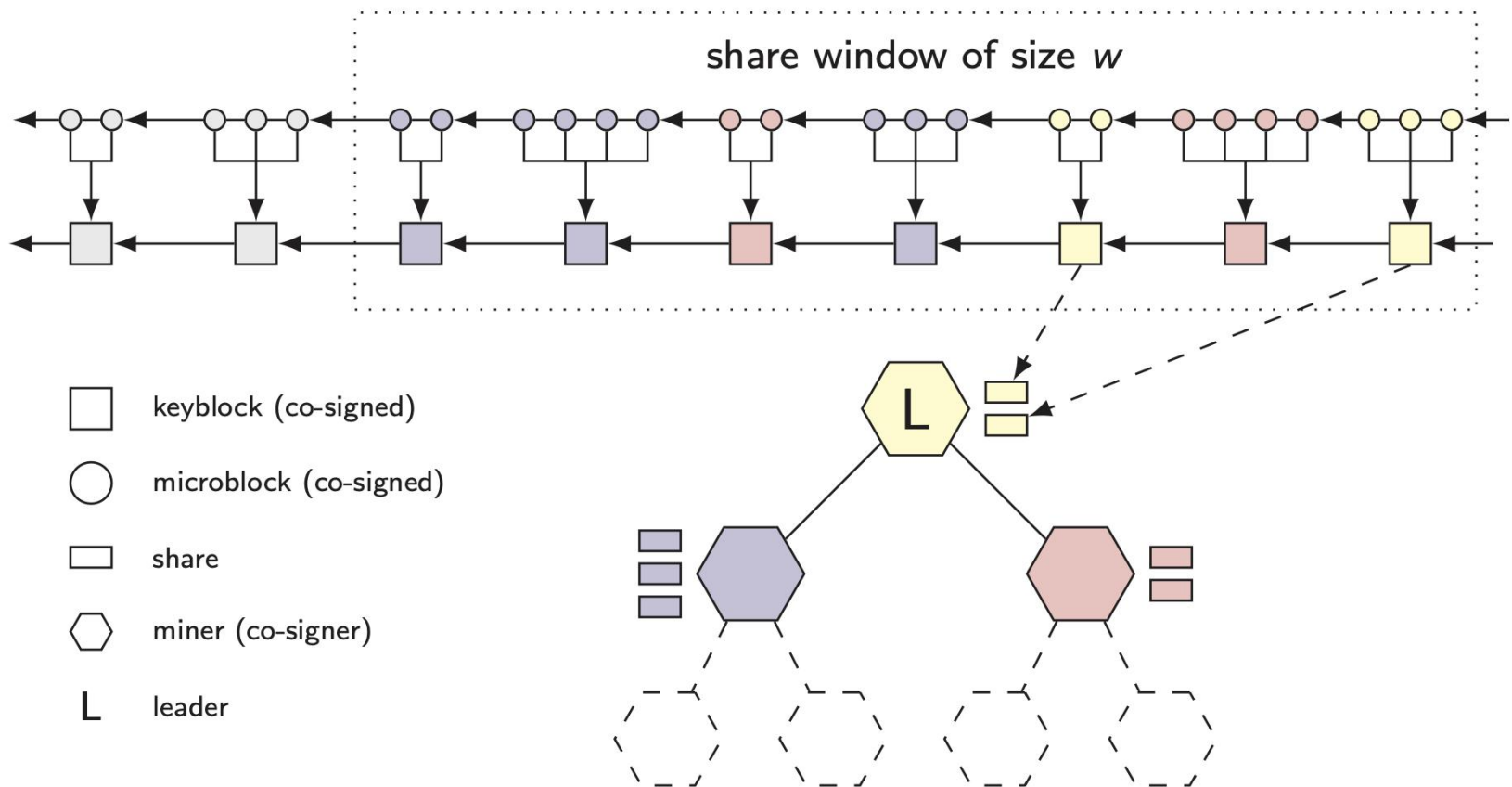
Byzcoin I

- Perform a dynamic committee election based on PoW.
 - Decouples transaction verification from mining.
 - Maintains two parallel blockchains; one contains microblocks (each contains a set of verified transactions), the other contains keyblocks (groups several microblocks together in the header and mined through PoW).
 - Once a transaction appears in a microblock, it is confirmed.
 - Keyblocks are used to elect the PBFT committee who will agree on the microblocks.
 - Needed to prevent Sybil attacks in open-committee PBFT.
 - A sliding window based approach, the miners of the last n keyblocks are the current committee members.

Byzcoin II

- Once a committee is defined, the miner of the latest keyblock will be the new leader.
- It initiates a PBFT protocol to collectively agree (and sign) new blocks (assuming the committee of size $3t+1$):
 - It suggest a new microblock and announce to the rest of the committee. This is called a pre-prepare message.
 - Each member validate the block and broadcast a prepare message indicating accepting the block.
 - Once each member receives at least $2t + 1$ prepare messages, they acknowledge that by broadcasting a commit message.
- All responses are authenticated using collective signature, CoSi (or basically multi-signature that allows several parties to sign a message and produce a single signature instead of many).

Byzcoin Pictorially



Mining rewards are distributed in proportion to the number of shares.

**From [Kogias et al., 2016]*

BFT Consensus - Issues

- Network connectivity/synchrony assumptions.
- $\frac{1}{3}$ of the mining power can be malicious.
 - Less than Bitcoin tolerance level.
- Scalability (i.e. number of miners).

Hybrid Mining Algorithms

- Combine several mining algorithms together to solve the limitations of using a single algorithm.
- Examples:
 - As mentioned before, usually proof-of-stake and proof-of-work are combined together. Proof-of-work is used to distribute the currency in the system initially, and then the network continues using proof-of-stake only.
 - Or use PoW or PoS to elect the committee in Byzantine agreement based protocols.

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