



Rethinking Distributed Ledger Technology

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Distributed ledger technology (DLT) offers new and unique advantages for information systems, but some of its features are not a good fit for many applications. We review the properties of DLT and show how two recently developed ideas can be used to retain its advantages while simplifying design.

While most of the excitement around blockchain stems from its use in cryptocurrencies, designers are beginning to find interesting ways to solve system problems using it and other forms of DLT. The most commonly used data structure for distributed ledgers is the blockchain. A key feature of a blockchain-based system is the decentralized,

replicated data synchronized among separate network nodes, which may be geographically dispersed. There is substantial discussion around some terms in DLT, *public* versus *private* in particular. We believe it is better to distinguish blockchain systems based on their permission model—permissioned or permissionless—because that is directly tied to the technology, whereas *private* or *public* may apply to the visibility of the network or ledger itself.

With its features providing distributed, trusted data using no central server, DLT seems to be a natural tool for many complex distributed systems, and a number of implementations have been proposed. However, some environments and applications are not well suited to using an append-only ledger. For example, an analysis of DLT for the international banking consortium the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) found that the permissionless model used by Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies “does not provide the level of trust, transparency, and accountability required by the



financial industry.”¹ The SWIFT analysis noted that permissioned ledgers are helpful, but “existing implementations of permissioned ledgers remain basic.” Of particular concern is the immutable aspect of transactions recorded in blockchains.²⁻⁴ As noted by the European Banking Institute, “Once an error is embedded in the blockchain, this may be highly problematic, legally, in that often law requires the ability to rectify errors as a matter of law in a way foreign to DLT.”² One option is to correct errors by issuing a new transaction that supersedes the older, erroneous transaction. In this way, the ledger provides a full history of events as they happened. While this is possible or desirable for some applications, privacy laws lead to additional complications, as discussed later.

In addition to complicating support for privacy rules, other properties of conventional blockchains are not a good match for applications beyond cryptocurrency,^{5,6} and modifications to distributed ledger designs are being developed to meet new needs. Blockchains are a valuable DLT for providing trust, but there are many ways to construct distributed ledgers. We propose an alternative that provides the trust features of blockchains with a more flexible data structure and ordering protocol.

DLT AND DATA MANAGEMENT

A distributed ledger, as the name suggests, is a distributed record of transactions maintained by consensus among a network of peer-to-peer nodes (possibly geographically dispersed). The most widely recognized form of DLT is the blockchain structure, which provides the basis for cryptocurrencies and a variety of other applications. Most currently available distributed ledger designs using blockchain provide certain properties:

- › *Pseudo-anonymity*: Especially for cryptocurrency, blockchains enable participation using only identifiers. Permissioned blockchains may not include this property.
- › *Public access and transparency*: Every participant can see all transactions on the blockchain, although they may be anonymized. This property may also not be provided in permissioned systems.
- › *Small transaction size*: Blockchains were originally designed

With each update, records are dispersed simultaneously to peer nodes, who ensure that the updates are correct.

- › *Replication and synchronization guarantee*: Transactions are duplicated across all nodes of the network so that every node has an identical copy of all transaction records current to the most recent update cycle. Consensus protocols are designed so that when the consensus is complete, all nodes have an identical copy of the distributed ledger records.

The financial industry views full traceability and simplified reconciliation of transactions among the key advantages of DLT.

for monetary transactions, so messages are assumed to be relatively small.

- › *Immutable records*: As a consequence of the linked chain of cryptographic hashes of records, a change to one record would cause the hash of subsequent records to be invalid, so changes require recomputing of the entire chain. As a result, it is generally intractable to change any record in a blockchain.
- › *Proof of work or other expensive consensus models*: This is a consequence of the need to prevent double spending. Permissioned blockchains do not generally need this feature and can use simpler consensus.
- › *Block ordering guarantee*: The consensus mechanism ensures ordering of the blocks, and therefore transactions, preventing the possibility of double spending.
- › *Decentralization*: There is no central authority for records.

- › *Integrity protection*: Cryptographic hashes are used to guarantee that records have not been changed.

We compare these properties with the needs of more typical applications of distributed data storage and retrieval in Table 1. Note that six of the nine blockchain properties designed for cryptocurrency are at odds with the requirements of many other applications.

NEED FOR AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION

The mismatch between blockchain properties and many application needs has led to a number of problems in applying blockchain designs to data management problems. For example, Bitcoin is designed to provide some degree of anonymity in transactions (i.e., only public identifiers, not real-world identities, are used), but the law may prohibit anonymity for many types of transactions and require participants

TABLE 1. Comparing characteristics of DLT applications.

Cryptocurrency	Finance, supply chain, e-commerce, etc.
1. Pseudo-anonymity	ID required for contracts or government regulation
2. Public access, transparency	Controlled access
3. Small transaction size	Range of message sizes up to large documents and images
4. Immutable records	Changes and deletions, often required by law
5. Proof of work and other expensive consensus models	Flexible consensus models
6. Block ordering guarantee	Time stamps often required
7. Decentralization	Same in many applications
8. Replication and Synchronization guarantee	Same in many applications
9. Integrity protection	Same in many applications

to be identified for tax or other purposes. Laws that require the ability to delete privacy relevant information, such as the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), may limit the type of information that can be stored in a blockchain.^{2,4}

For system engineers, the price of distributed trust is often an added complexity. The design choices that were made to incorporate anonymity and prevent double spending in blockchains often lead to seemingly unnecessary complications when applied to areas beyond cryptocurrency. For example, immutability has resulted in designs where alterable records must be kept off of the blockchain, with only pointers to them stored in the blockchain itself. Alternatively, some designs involve encrypting data on the blockchain and then destroying the encryption key to delete the data. Neither of these options may be desirable for many applications, as the first option leads to unnecessary complications, and the second risks the data's being decrypted in the future, when data must be protected for decades. These are serious design issues for supporting privacy requirements, such as those

of the GDPR, resulting in proposals, such as an editable blockchain,⁷ using new forms of hashing. For cryptocurrency, a consensus algorithm is needed to guarantee record ordering in the absence of a central time authority (i.e., transactions are ordered based on group consensus rather than the time of entry into a system), and this ordering is used to prevent double spending. Designs for access control using blockchain may involve tokenizing permissions, passing these to users, and spending down the value to remove a permission from a user. All of these strategies are needed to take advantage of blockchain's trust properties, but blockchains would probably not be used if a more conventional database could provide the desired distributed trust.

At first glance, blockchain solutions for applications, such as supply chains, financial settlements, and others, may appear to offer nothing more than added complexity in comparison with a conventional database. However, when more than one organization is involved, the decentralized trust of blockchains and other distributed ledgers can be a tremendous advantage. For example, consider regulated

industries where auditing is a part of doing business. Every node on the system can have a full set of records detailing the movement of assets. Any shared database can keep track of asset movement, but DLT adds trust by maintaining current integrity-protected records at every organization, making it easy to audit the process. Thus, the financial industry views full traceability and simplified reconciliation of transactions among the key advantages of DLT.¹ We can view DLT as adding a layer of distributed trust to the problem of data storage and retrieval, clearly a desirable property, but industry is still struggling with how to use DLT in practical ways.

A PERMISSIONED DISTRIBUTED LEDGER MODEL FOR DECENTRALIZED TRUST

Much of the current DLT research seems to center on how to bypass properties that were built into blockchain. Adaptations, such as faster consensus algorithms, are gradually moving DLT from its origin in cryptocurrency toward a more general-purpose database technology. However, instead of tweaking blockchain designs, we can rethink the idea of a distributed ledger to reflect the needs of data management applications, as discussed earlier.

Can we provide a simpler model that gives the decentralized trust of a blockchain but otherwise behaves as a conventional database? In this section, we describe an approach to achieving this goal using two recent proposals: a data block matrix⁸ and verified time.⁹ The data block matrix retains hash-based data integrity guarantees while allowing controlled modification or deletion of specified records, with integrity guarantees for all other records. A data block matrix can be implemented in a decentralized system to provide data replication among peers. The verified time protocol allows guaranteed time stamps to be used in place of consensus algorithms to ensure record ordering.



	0	1	2	3	4	
0	•	1	3	7	13	H _{0,-}
1	2	•	5	9	15	H _{1,-}
2	4	6	•	11	17	H _{2,-}
3	8	10	12	•	19	H _{3,-}
4	14	16	18	20	•	H _{4,-}
	H ₋₀	H ₋₁	H ₋₂	H ₋₃	H ₋₄	etc.

Figure 1. A data block matrix with numbered cells.

The data block matrix uses an array of blocks, with hash values for each row and column. This structure makes it possible to delete or modify a particular block with hash values, assuring that other blocks have not been affected. An example is shown in Figure 1. Suppose that it is desired to delete block 12 by writing all zeroes to that block or otherwise modifying it. This change disrupts the hash values of H_{3,-} and H₋₂ for row 3 and column 2. However, the integrity of all blocks except the one containing X is still ensured by the other hash values. That is, other blocks of row 3 are included in the hashes for columns 0, 1, 3, and 4. Similarly, other blocks of column 2 are included in the hashes for rows 0, 1, 2, and 4. Thus, the integrity of blocks that have not been deleted is assured. Blocks can be deleted by overwriting with zeroes or other values, with one row and one column hash recalculated; specifically, after deleting block *i, j*, row *i*, and column *j*, hash values are recalculated.

The data structure ensures the following properties:⁸

- › *Balance*: The upper half (above diagonal) contains, at most, one additional cell more than the lower half does.
- › *Hash sequence length*: This is the number of blocks in a row or column hash proportional to \sqrt{N} for a matrix with *N* blocks by the balance property.
- › *Number of blocks*: The total number of data blocks in the matrix

is $N^2 - N$ because the diagonal is null.

- › *Block dispersal*: No consecutive blocks appear in the same row or column.

Clearly, this data structure is not suited to all DLT applications, but it offers features that are difficult to provide with a conventional blockchain. Our goal is not to replace blockchains but to offer a new form of data storage structure that provides the integrity guarantees of blockchain with the addition of reversibility, which can be used in a wide range of applications. A comparison is shown in Table 2.

In distributed ledger designs, the role of time is often an afterthought. Some DLT systems have no inherent transaction time stamp to record when the transaction was submitted to the system. Rather, the transactions adopt the time when they were included into the ledger, which may occur after a significant amount of time has passed since being submitted. This approach has worked for applications where just having a transaction accepted is good enough (e.g., we do not need to know that a cryptocurrency transaction was submitted down to the millisecond, just that it was submitted and eventually recorded in the ledger).

However, when time-dependent situations arise, a time stamp becomes more important, and knowing when a transaction was submitted to a system may be more important than knowing when it was incorporated into the

ledger. Often, systems will rely on local system time or a network time, and both may differ from one system to the next. Distributed ledgers must be able to operate in environments that include rules mandated by governments or contracts. For some applications, the ordering of transactions into blocks within the blockchain may not be enough, and there is a need for a global time stamp service, providing verified time.⁹ Time is a key component of this because things happen outside of the blockchain that matter for applications. Orders must be fulfilled by a specified date and time, legal papers must be filed on schedule, and so on, requiring time stamps of events that take place outside of the blockchain.

A global time-stamping approach would include an agreed-upon and accepted service. This approach could incorporate a high-resolution blockchain time mechanism, such as the open source Chainpoint protocol,¹⁰ into the distributed ledger to produce a final and agreed upon time stamp. Chainpoint uses the Network Time Protocol with the National Institute of Standards and Technology Randomness Beacon to provide provable time stamps, and it might be adapted to the needs described here.

The blockchain data structure and proof-of-work protocol were designed to solve the problem of double spending in cryptocurrencies. Although blockchain

TABLE 2. Blockchain and data block matrix features.

Blockchain: provides integrity and sequencing	Data block matrix: provides integrity and erasure
Integrity protection and no erasure possible	Integrity protection for all blocks not erased
Double-spend problem solved by distributed transaction ordering guarantees	Ability to erase values obviates need for ordering guarantees through consensus algorithms
Ordering guarantees require consensus algorithms	Ordering guarantees granted by time authority

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has found many applications outside of cryptocurrency, many of its features are not well suited to common data-management applications, leading many to argue that distributed ledgers are only databases with more complex features. As we have described, the added trust of distributed ledgers is a valuable feature, providing greatly simplified auditability and verification of actions among multiple parties in applications, such as supply chain and others.

The blockchain design for hash-based integrity verification provides trust at the cost of an inability to delete or update records, leading to design complications that would not arise with conventional database management systems. Similarly, the sequencing guarantees of blockchain consensus protocols are needed for cryptocurrency in the absence of a universal time stamp. Moreover, actions within the distributed ledger must be connected with other actions in the real world through accurate time stamps. We have presented a new architecture that provides the trust features of blockchains with characteristics that allow for simpler designs and greater practicality in conventional data management problems. We believe this alternative can lead to new approaches

to incorporating trust into distributed systems applications. 

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