Termination of Ethereum’s Smart Contracts
Thomas Genet, Thomas Jensen, Justine Sauvage

To cite this version:
Thomas Genet, Thomas Jensen, Justine Sauvage. Termination of Ethereum’s Smart Contracts. SECRIPT 2020 - 17th International Conference on Security and Cryptography, Jul 2020, Lieusaint - Paris / Virtual, France. pp.39-51, 10.5220/0009564100390051 . hal-03122008

HAL Id: hal-03122008
https://inria.hal.science/hal-03122008
Submitted on 26 Jan 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
Termination of Ethereum’s Smart Contracts

Thomas Genet, Thomas Jensen and Justine Sauvage

Univ Rennes, Inria, CNRS, IRISA
{Thomas.Genet, Thomas.Jensen}@irisa.fr, Justine.Sauvage@ens-lyon.fr

Keywords:
Formal Methods for Security, Ethereum, Smart Contracts, Security in Distributed Systems

Abstract:
Ethereum is a decentralized blockchain technology equipped with so-called Smart Contracts. A contract is a program whose code is public, which can be triggered by any user, and whose actual execution is performed by miners participating in Ethereum. Miners execute the contract on the Ethereum Virtual Machine (EVM) and apply its effect by adding new blocks to the blockchain. A contract that takes too much time to be processed by the miners of the network may result into delays or a denial of service in the Ethereum system. To prevent this scenario, termination of Ethereum’s Smart Contracts is ensured using a gas mechanism. Roughly, the EVM consumes gas to process each instruction of a contract and the gas provided to run a contract is limited. This technique could make termination of contracts easy to prove but the way the official definition of the EVM specifies gas usage makes the proof of this property non-trivial. EVM implementations and formal analysis techniques of EVM’s Smart Contracts use termination of contracts as an assumption, so having a formal proof of termination of contracts is crucial. This paper presents a mechanized, formal, and general proof of termination of Smart Contracts based on a measure of EVM call stacks.

A blockchain is a decentralized ledger, shared over a network, on which all users agree. Users can submit new elements to be added to this ledger. To add new elements in the ledger, one needs to add a new block (containing the new elements) to the blockchain. A block will be added to the blockchain if most of the participants agree on it. In Bitcoin, to add a new block to the chain, one has to solve a cryptographic puzzle on this new block in a limited amount of time (around 10 minutes in Bitcoin). This is called mining a block. Since the puzzle is computationally difficult it requires that most users participate in its resolution. Users contributing to the resolution are called miners. The fact that most miners try to solve the same puzzle entails that they all agree on the block itself and on all the added elements.

Bitcoin is equipped with a programming language, called Script [script, 2014], that is used to define programs reading inputs in the blockchain and proposing outputs (new elements) to be added to the blockchain. It is the role of the miners to execute the Script programs and to build the new blocks containing the outputs of those programs. If one Script program is non-terminating, this prevents miners from building new blocks and adding them to the blockchain within the 10 minutes time limit. If many Script programs are non terminating, this could cause a denial of service in the Bitcoin system. This is the reason why the Script language is not Turing-complete, in particular it has no loops.

Ethereum extends Bitcoin’s blockchain with a Turing-complete programming language and the ability to store those programs (called contracts) in the blockchain itself. Contracts are programmed into dedicated high-level languages like Solidity [solidity, 2014] or Vyper [vyper, 2017] and compiled to a bytecode format executed by the so-called Ethereum Virtual Machine (EVM). Since the programming language is Turing-complete, Ethereum needs to prevent looping contracts. In addition, Ethereum also targets to accelerate the pace of block additions w.r.t. Bitcoin. Thus, a terminating contract that takes too long to complete is another source of...
denial of service for Ethereum. Ethereum protects its system from non terminating programs and too complex programs with a single mechanism: the gas (Buterin, 2013). Intuitively, the EVM consumes gas to process each instruction of a contract and the gas provided to run a contract is limited.

Though this mechanism looks simple and robust, the protection it offers against denial of service is fragile. For instance, in 2016, badly chosen gas values for some EVM instructions resulted into several denial of service of Ethereum. This had to be fixed by two consecutive hard forks of the system (Hudson, 2016a; Hudson, 2016b). Independently of choosing for the best gas cost for each instruction, a general question to ask is whether the gas mechanism is sufficient to prove termination of any contract? Surprisingly, proving formally that this is true is not trivial because of the complexity of the EVM semantics (see Section 4).

The goal of this paper is twofold: to prove that no program can execute indefinitely without consuming gas in the EVM execution model, and to prove it in a way that can be used in a mechanized proof. More precisely, we present two termination proofs on two slightly different EVM semantics. The first model is the formal semantics of the (foundational) Ethereum Yellow Paper (Gavin, 2014), the Isabelle/HOL EVM semantics (Hirai, 2017; Amani et al., 2018) and the small-step formal semantics of (Grishchenko et al., 2018b). The second model is the semantics of the reference implementations of EVM such as (pevm, 2017; Amani et al., 2018) and the Isabelle/HOL EVM semantics (Hirai, 2017; Amani et al., 2018). Noteworthy, the implementations and the Yellow Paper disagree on the gas consumption when calling a contract from another contract. In the Yellow Paper, when a contract $c_1$ calls another contract $c_2$ with, say, $g$ units of gas, the gas associated to $c_1$ is not charged immediately. In implementations, this gas is immediately consumed. This little difference in the semantics makes a big difference when we are interested in proving the termination of contracts. Indeed, with the Yellow Paper semantics, a contract $c_1$ calling itself can loop without consuming gas, until it exhausts the call stack. This paper provides a termination proof of contracts for the two semantics. Proving termination of contracts when gas is charged immediately is natural and will be briefly discussed in Section 6. Proving termination of the contracts for the Yellow Paper semantics is more difficult and requires a complex termination measure on call stacks. Though the Yellow Paper semantics differs from the reference implementations, having a termination proof for this semantics is important. First, this termination proof contributes evidence that the Yellow Paper semantic model is indeed coherent. Second, this semantics serves as a base for formal verification tools, such as (Grishchenko et al., 2018b), or for formal semantics such as (Hirai, 2017; Amani et al., 2018). In those tools and semantics, the termination of contracts is used as an assumption. In particular, in the Isabelle/HOL formalization of (Hirai, 2017; Amani et al., 2018) the termination of the contract evaluation is proven using an internal step counter, which is not related to the gas, and simplifies the proofs. Our proof complement their work by showing how the gas itself ensures termination of contracts, and thus assuming termination of contracts in the Yellow Paper semantics was indeed correct.

Contributions: This paper gives the first formal and mechanized proof of termination of EVM contracts, written in EVM bytecode. The central part is a measure that can be used for the proof of termination in a proof assistant (in our case Isabelle/HOL). We prove termination for:

- the two variants of the semantics of the contract call described above;
- a formal model where contracts can add and run arbitrary new contracts;
- a formal model that safely over-approximates the EVM semantics with minimal assumptions. In particular, for non-zero cost byte code operations (i.e. all operations except STOP, RETURN, REVERT), we only require that they have any strictly positive cost. Similarly, we only require the call stack size is upper-bounded by any natural number greater than 0.

Note that having minimal assumptions on the concrete gas costs for each operation is valuable because the gas cost has already changed several times during the EVM’s lifetime and is likely to
evolve again since gas pricing of operations is still not fully satisfactory (Yang et al., 2019).

1 RELATED WORK

The Ethereum system has been formalized in the so-called Yellow Paper (Gavin, 2014) which has been updated recently (Gavin, 2019). This update does not impact gas consumption but provides some new instructions which are taken into account in our formal proof. A nice complementary reading is the White Paper (Buterin, 2013) which provides useful intuitions about the system. There are several available reference implementations of EVM such as [pevm, 2017; gevm, 2014].

Grishchenko et al. have proposed EtherTrust (ethertrust, 2017) a verification framework for the static analysis of contracts code (Grishchenko et al., 2018a). The static analysis tools focus on proving some security properties on contracts, such as single-entrancy (Grishchenko et al., 2018b). EtherTrust comes with a complete small-step semantics for EVM (Grishchenko et al., 2018b) that uses the Yellow Paper semantics for the contract call.

There are several attempts to define a mechanized and formal semantics of EVM. The first one was defined in Lem by Yoichi Hirai (Hirai, 2017). This semantics was defined to prove safety and security properties on specific contracts. It is partially executable and can be used to export Isabelle/HOL theories. The objective here was to compile EVM bytecode to Isabelle/HOL theories so that properties on those specific contracts can be proved in Isabelle/HOL. This semantics is very precise w.r.t. specification of low level operations of EVM but it does not precisely follow the gas consumption during calls (see Section 6.2 of (Hirai, 2017)). Thus, this mechanized semantics is not usable, as is, for the proof we want to carry out. Another mechanized semantics is the one by Everett Hildenbrandt et al. (Hildenbrandt et al., 2018) in the K framework. This semantics is fully executable and passes official test suite of EVM (ETS, 2015). This semantics consumes gas at the call point (see rule <k> callWithCode in https://github.com/kframework/evm-semantics/blob/master/evm.md). In Section 6, we will discuss termination of contracts in this specific setting.

A contract running out of gas stops without completing its task and becomes useless. Thus estimating gas consumption of contracts is an active research subject. For instance, (Grech et al., 2018) proposes a static analysis of contract’s code to detect resumable loops, loops bounded by inputs, etc. that can lead to an execution running out of gas. Our objective here is different since we aim at proving that whatever the contract code, it cannot loop forever while not spending gas.

2 ETHEREUM

The blockchain of Ethereum describes the global state of the system, noted $\sigma$. In Ethereum a global state $\sigma$ contains accounts. An account is a structure composed of 4 elements: a nonce, a balance (an amount of money in the virtual currency called Ether), a data storage and a code. In Ethereum, there exists two types of accounts: external accounts with an empty code and contracts with a non-empty code.

Calling a contract External accounts are used to store information and Ether. Like in Bitcoin, it is possible to transfer Ether from an account to another through a transaction. When a transaction is sent to an account having a code, i.e. a contract, a part of the money is used to pay for the execution of the code $^3$ This is called calling a contract. When calling a contract, the sent money is not collected by the contract itself but by the miner who accepts to execute contract’s code and to add the updated accounts and blocks to the blockchain. In other words, from a given global state $\sigma$, the miners produce the new global state $\sigma'$ resulting of the transactions (and contracts) application on $\sigma$. Since adding blocks to the blockchain costs computation power, the miner needs a way to estimate if the reward (money sent to the contract) is competitive with its own computational effort. In Ethereum, this estimation is made possible through the gas mechanism. Every basic instruction of contract’s code has a fixed cost in gas and every contract claims an (estimated) maximal cost in gas to run its code. Besides, when an account calls a contract it also fixes a gas price in Ether. This is used to motivate miners to execute one particular transaction by increasing the gas price and thus their reward.

Example 1. On the left-hand side of Figure 3 in the state $\sigma$, there are two accounts $a_i$ and $a_j$.

$^3$In addition, it is possible to transfer money to a contract, but this part is not important for our termination proof and will not be modeled here.
Creating a contract Any contract $c_1$ can create a (new) contract $c_2$ with any arbitrary code, provided that $c_1$ is given enough gas to store all the instructions of the bytecode of $c_2$ in the new global state $\sigma'$. If contract creation succeeds, this makes contract $c_2$ publicly available in $\sigma'$.

3 ETHEREUM VIRTUAL MACHINE : EVM

Contract code is run on the Ethereum Virtual Machine (EVM). Contracts are written in high-level languages such as Solidity (solidity, 2014) or Vyper (vyper, 2017) and compiled to a bytecode format specific to EVM. A bytecode program is a list of instructions and during the execution a program counter ($pc$) gives the index of the next instruction to execute. EVM is a stack machine and the effect of arithmetic instructions, test instructions, storage instructions is to read and/or modify this stack, called the execution stack.

There are more than 60 different instructions in EVM. We can split them in 5 families:

- **Execution stack operations** This family encompasses all arithmetic, logic and test instructions like ADD, SUB, AND, OR, EQ, LT, etc. This family also contains instructions that push, pop, swap or duplicate the elements on the execution stack.

- **Memory access** This family contains instructions whose effect is to transfer data between the execution stack and either the temporary local memory (MLOAD, MSTORE) or into the permanent memory (SLOAD, SSTORE). The temporary local memory is a memory where a contract can read and write during its execution and which is erased after contract’s completion. The permanent memory is in accounts’ storage (thus in the blockchain) and will survive after contract’s completion, like variable $i$ in contract $a_i$ of Example 1.

- **Environment operations** These are the operations that gather information on the current transaction and contract (who called this contract, how many gas unit are left, etc.).

- **Control flow operations** Those operations modify the control flow inside the same contract: JUMP, JUMPI (conditional jump), JUMPIST (marks a jump destination), ... .

- **System operations** This family gathers all the operations that permit to create and destroy a contract (CREATE, SUICIDE in (Gavin, 2014), or SELFDESTRUCT in (Gavin, 2019)) and the call and exit operations on contracts (CALL, CALLCODE, DELEGATECALL, RETURN) and additional (REVERT, CALLSTATIC) in (Gavin, 2019).
The differences between the four types of call (CALL, CALLCODE, DELEGATECALL, CALLSTATIC) are subtle. The differences essentially lies in the way the global state is affected by calling the contract and not about the way gas is consumed. The contract called by CALL changes the state of the callee, like in Example 1. The contract called by CALLCODE changes the state of the caller, like when calling a library code. In Example 2, assume that state of account a, has a field i, then a CALLCODE on a, would have incremented the value of this field in the state of account a. The DELEGATECALL acts as a CALLCODE except that the identity of the contract caller is different. In a contract called by CALLSTATIC the identity of the caller is not the identity of the caller of the contract, like when calling a library code. In Example 1, if contract c1 is called with DELEGATECALL, the call to contract c2 happens like with a CALLCODE except that identity of the caller is not c1 but the identity of the caller of c1. See (Grishchenko et al., 2018a) for details. Finally, CALLSTATIC is similar to CALL except that no modification of the state is permitted. It can be considered as a "pure" function call without side-effects. Since there is no difference between the 4 call instructions w.r.t. to gas consumption, we will abstract them in the same way in Section 3.2.

As explained above, to implement the gas mechanism, EVM’s designers have chosen to associate each operation with a cost in gas. All operations, except zero-cost operations (STOP, REVERT and RETURN), have a cost strictly greater than zero. Some instructions, like SELFDESTRUCT or SSTORE may result into a gas refund. SELFDESTRUCT destroys the current executed contract and the Ether which may be present in the account is refunded. SSTORE writes information in the permanent storage of the account and, thus, in the blockchain. Refund with SSTORE happens when it replaces a non-zero value by a zero. This kind of erasure permits to save space in the blockchain and is, thus, rewarded. Refunds obtained using SELFDESTRUCT or SSTORE are accumulated during the execution in a separate counter and given back after the completion of the whole contract. As a result, during the contract execution, the available gas is not increased by those specific refunds.

Now, to give some intuition about EVM's behavior, we describe more precisely the semantics of some particular instructions. We present all those instructions through their EtherTrust (ethertrust, 2017) small-step semantic rules. Some examples of Yellow Paper semantics and their EtherTrust counterpart can be found here (Genet et al., 2020). The interest of EtherTrust rules w.r.t to the Yellow Paper is that they describe in the same place the effect of the instruction on the state of the system and the gas consumption.

3.1 The ADD instruction

The rules for the ADD instruction are given Figure 3.1. In these rules, µ is the local state of the stack machine where µ.s denotes the execution stack, µ.pc the program counter, µ.gas the available gas. The other record ε represents the parameters of the transaction where ε.code denotes the program under execution. Thus ε.code[µ.pc] is the current instruction to execute. Below the line of the semantic rules, (µ, ε, σ, η) :: S is the current call stack. An element of the call stack is called a frame, e.g., (µ, ε, σ, η) is the top frame of the current call stack. The field η is a transaction effect where the only information that could be relevant for us w.r.t. gas consumption would be the refund counter. However, as explained in Section 3, this refund counter is separate from the gas available for operation execution. Finally, σ is the current state of the global state. Since, there are no side effects, every update on this global state is propagated by the semantic rules. In the first rule, for ADD, there is enough gas to execute ADD and an execution stack with at least two elements. Thus, the call stack becomes (µ’, ε, σ, η) :: S where µ’ is µ with an updated execution stack, an increased program counter µ.pc, and a µ.gas decreased of 3 gas units. The second rule defines the execution of ADD when there are not enough elements on the execution stack or not enough gas to execute ADD. This results into stacking an exception frame (EXC) on top of the call stack.

3.2 The CALL instruction

The rule for the CALL (Figure 3.2) defines the CALL execution when everything is OK: the execution stack contains enough arguments to perform the call (µ.s has at least 7 elements), there is enough gas to perform the call µ.gas ≥ c, and there is room in the call stack to add a new frame (|A| + 1 < 1024). The cost c is the sum of the costs for calling the CALL instruction itself (700 gas units) plus a variable cost depending on the size of the input and output of the contract: this gas is paid when reading contract parameters and outputting its future result. On the lower part of
this rule, the call stack \((\mu, i, \sigma, \eta) :: S\) becomes \((\mu', i', \sigma', \eta') :: (\mu, i, \sigma, \eta) :: S\) where \((\mu', i', \sigma', \eta')\) is a new frame stack which has been added on top of the call stack, where \(\mu'\) is a new record, where \(\mu'.pc = c.code\) is the code transferred to the new frame stack by the old one and \(\mu'.pc\) is set to \(0\). The code to execute in this new frame is \(c'.code = \sigma.(to).code\) where \(\sigma.(to)\) is the account receiving the call. Note that, like it was stated in the above sections, the new call stack is \((\mu', i', \sigma', \eta') :: (\mu, i, \sigma, \eta) :: S\) where the gas sent to the new frame \((\mu'.gas)\) has not been subtracted from the frame \((\mu, i, \sigma, \eta)\) but so is \(\mu.gas\). The gas is retracted when the contracts returns. Note also that this is compatible with the Yellow Paper semantics where, upon updating the gas \(\mu.gas\) the execution of the CALL, one has to know how much gas \(g'\) will be refunded after the execution of the called contract, see \(\{\text{Genet et al., 2020}\}\).

3.3 The RETURN instruction

Contract returning is performed by two rules (Figure 2). The first rule processes the RETURN operation, where the current instruction to execute \(c.code[\mu.pc]\) is abbreviated by \(\omega_{\mu, i, \sigma, \eta}\).

The effect of this rule is to replace the frame by an HALT frame with the information that should be provided to the caller, i.e., the possible updates on the global state \(\sigma\), the remaining gas \(g\), a result \(d\) and transaction effects \(\eta\). Finally, the HALT frame is popped by the second rule of (Figure 2). We only present the rule for the standard case, i.e., in the frame below the HALT frame, the current instruction is a CALL and the execution stack contains all the information that were necessary to perform the call. Then, we retract the gas units necessary to perform the call (noted \(c\)) and refund gas units of gas coming from the HALT frame. The global store \(\sigma'\) coming from the HALT frame replaces \(\sigma\) in the current frame. For the semantics of the CREATE instruction, see \(\{\text{Genet et al., 2020}\}\).

4 AN EVM MODEL SPECIALIZED FOR GAS ANALYSIS

The gas mechanism ensures that a contract can only run a finite number of “local” instructions, i.e., instructions whose effect is local to the current contract (no call, return, etc.). As mentioned above, when a contract \(c_1\) calls another contract \(c_2\) with, say, \(g\) units of gas, the gas associated to \(c_1\) is not charged immediately. Thus, using Yellow Paper semantics, a contract \(c_1\) calling itself is indefinitely looping. The Yellow Paper prevents this by fixing a call stack size limit. If a contract exhausts the stack limit then its execution ends by an exception. However, unlike other virtual machines, EVM has no exception catching mechanism. When an exception is raised in a contract \(c\), the execution of \(c\) stops, the information of the contract \(c\) is popped from the stack and the control flow goes back to the previous contract in the stack if it exists, otherwise the execution stops.

To sum up, termination of contracts in the formal semantics of the Yellow Paper is enforced by the gas mechanism and the fact that the call stack is finite. In the following, to formally prove termination we prove that, whatever the contracts may be, the call stacks decrease w.r.t. a well founded-ordering. First, we define the call stacks and the frames composing the call stacks based on
the formal small-step semantics of (Gavin, 2014; Gavin, 2019) and (Grishchenko et al., 2018a; Grishchenko et al., 2018b).

The maximal call stack size The maximal call stack size is denoted by \( \text{stack\_lim} \). We assume that \( \text{stack\_lim} \) is a natural number strictly greater to 0.

Abstraction of the frames For running a contract \( c_1 \), the EVM stores information in the call stack. In the following, we call this information a frame. Following (Grishchenko et al., 2018b), our frames can denote standard program execution frames, HALT frames and EXC frames.

In our EVM model specialized for gas analysis, we can abstract frames by three different frame forms: either \( \text{Ok}(g, pc, p, e) \), \( \text{Halt}(g, e) \) or \( \text{Exception} \), where \( g \) is a gas value, \( pc \) is a program counter, \( p \) is a program code, and \( e \) is an environment.

Like in (Grishchenko et al., 2018b), this environment is an abstraction of the global state of the system \( \sigma \). In our model, this environment maps contract names to the associated codes. An \( \text{Ok}(g, pc, p, e) \) frame represents a standard execution frame \( (\mu, i, \sigma, \eta) \), where we abstract away \( \eta \) and most parts of \( \mu \) (including the execution stack and the local memory). In \( \mu \), we only keep track of \( \mu, pc \) the program counter and \( \mu, gas \) the available gas. Similarly, we forget everything about \( i \) except \( i, code \) the current program to execute.

In \( \sigma \), we only follow the contract names associated to code and forget about all other type of information. A \( \text{Halt}(g, e) \) frame represents a contract that successfully reaches a RETURN instruction, where \( g \) is the gas remaining after the execution of the contract (the refund) and \( e \) is the (possibly) modified environment. In particular, \( e \) may contain new contract names and their associated code.

On the opposite, the result value \( d \) and the effect \( \eta \) are not stored in our abstract version of the semantics, because they have no impact on the control flow nor on gas consumption. In particular, if a conditional jump depends on the result \( d \) then this will be modeled in our abstract semantics by the fact that the abstract Jump instruction can jump to any valid position in the current contract. Finally an \( \text{Exception} \) frame represents a contract whose execution has failed because it exhausted the available gas, overflowed the call stack, jumped to an invalid \( pc \) or tried to execute an undefined instruction.

The call stacks Call stacks will be represented by lists of frames, where the top of the stack is the left-most element of the list.

Example 2. (1) Assume that we are running a unique contract \( c_1 \) having 18 gas units left, a program counter \( pc \), a program \( p \) and an environment \( e \). The corresponding call stack will thus be \( \text{Ok}(18, pc, p, e) \). (2) Assume that the instruction at position \( pc \) in \( p \) is a CALL to contract \( c_2 \) with a calling gas value of 10, then the call stack becomes \( \text{Ok}(10, 0, pc, p, e) \). (3) Now assume that the instruction at position 0 in \( pc \) consumes 2 gas units, the call stack is now \( \text{Ok}(8, 1, pc, p, e) \). (4) Then, assume that contract \( c_2 \) reaches program point \( pc \) with 4 gas units left and the environment \( e_4 \): \( \text{Ok}(4, pc, p, e_4) \). (5) At \( pc \) in \( p \) there is a RETURN instruction so that \( c_2 \) halts on a valid state. The call stack becomes: \( \text{Halt}(4, e_4) \). (6) Then, the frame of contract \( c_2 \) is popped and control is returned back to \( c_1 \) that called \( c_2 \). When returning back to \( c_1 \), we have to consume all the gas used for the call: the cost of the call instruction itself with the cost of calling \( c_2 \). Assume that the call instruction costs 3 gas. Thus, we need to consume 3 gas plus the gas that was planned at step (2) for calling contract \( c_2 \): 10. Besides, we refund the 4 gas returned by \( \text{Halt} \) and place the environment \( e_4 \) into \( c_1 \) frame. Thus, the call stack becomes \( \text{Ok}(9, pc+1, p, e_4) \). (7) Now we assume that, the execution of contract \( c_1 \) ends with an exceptional state. The resulting stack is thus \( \text{Exception} \).

5 TERMINATION PROOF FOR THE YELLOW PAPER SEMANTICS IN ISABELLE/HOL

5.1 The Termination measure

A usual technique to prove termination of a recursive function \( f \) mapping values of type \( A \) to values of type \( B \) is to define a well-founded strict ordering \( \succ \) on elements of type \( A \). This ordering has to be defined such that for all \( x \in A \) if \( f(x) \) evaluates to \( f(y) \), noted \( f(x) \sim f(y) \), then we have \( x \succ y \). If such a well-founded ordering \( \succ \) exists then it proves termination of \( f \). Indeed, for any infinite derivation \( f(t_1) \sim f(t_2) \sim \ldots \),
we have an infinite chain \( t_1 \succ t_2 \succ \ldots \), which contradicts the fact that \( \succ \) is well-founded.

To prove termination of the EVM semantics, we need to show that when executing one EVM bytecode on a stack \( s_1 \) we obtain a stack \( s_2 \) which is strictly smaller to \( s_1 \) w.r.t. a well-founded ordering \( \succ \). Finding such an order is not straightforward as we show on the following example. For instance, to prove termination on the execution of Example 2 we need a well-founded ordering \( \succ \) such that

\[
\begin{align*}
(1) & \quad [Ok(18, pc, p, e)] \succ \\
(2) & \quad [Ok(10, 0, p2, e2), Ok(18, pc, p, e)] \succ \\
(3) & \quad [Ok(8, 1, p2, e3), Ok(18, pc, p, e)] \succ \\
(4) & \quad [Ok(4, pc2, p2, e4), Ok(18, pc, p, e)] \succ \\
(5) & \quad [Halt(4, e), Ok(18, pc, p, e)] \succ \\
(6) & \quad [Ok(9, pc + 1, p, e4)] \succ \\
(7) & \quad [Exception]
\end{align*}
\]

Since we may have loops in a frame, we may have two consecutive frames with the same \( pc \) or ascending \( pc \). Thus, the program counter is not relevant for the ordering. In the same way, since environments \( e, c2, e3, e4 \) and programs \( p, p2 \) may not evolve between two frames, they are hardly usable for a strict ordering. Hence, the ordering can only depend on the gas value of the frames. If we abstract away anything but gas from the previous example, we obtain:

\[
\begin{align*}
[Ok(18)] & \succ \\
[Ok(10), Ok(18)] & \succ \\
[Ok(8), Ok(18)] & \succ \\
[Ok(4), Ok(18)] & \succ \\
[Halt(4), Ok(18)] & \succ \\
[Ok(9)] & \succ \\
[Exception]
\end{align*}
\]

Note that, using a simple ordering for \( \succ \) does not satisfy the above ordering chain. For instance, the following orderings fail:

- comparing the size of the list:
  \( [Ok(18)] \not\succ [Ok(10), Ok(18)] \)

- comparing the gas value of the topmost frame:
  \( [Halt(4), Ok(18)] \not\succ [Ok(9)] \)

- comparing the gas value of frames from bottom to top:
  \( [Ok(18)] \not\succ [Ok(10), Ok(18)] \)

- comparing the sum of the gas values:
  \( [Ok(18)] \not\succ [Ok(10), Ok(18)] \)

- or, lexicographic combinations of them starting from the leftmost part of the list:
  \( [Halt(4), Ok(18)] \not\succ [Ok(9)] \)

- or, lexicographic combinations of them starting from the rightmost part of the list:
  \( [Ok(18)] \not\succ [Ok(10), Ok(18)] \)

The order we define to prove termination of EVM semantics is based on measure functions, i.e., functions mapping frames to natural numbers. Thus, stacks can be evaluated into lists of natural numbers and lists of natural numbers are compared using a lexicographic combination of the order \( \succ \) on natural numbers. Before defining our measure functions, we complete the call stacks by dummy frames up to the frame stack’s maximal size \( stack\_lim \). These dummy frames (noted \( D \)) have a gas value depending on the type of the topmost frame and on its gas value if there is one (for \( Ok \) and \( Halt \)) and 0 otherwise (for \( Exception \)). If the topmost frame is \( Ok(i) \) then the dummy frames will be \( D(i+3) \), if the topmost frame is \( Halt(i) \) then the dummy frames will be \( D(i+2) \). If the topmost frame is \( Exception \) then the dummy frames will be \( D(0) \). Assuming that the maximal stack size is 4, the frame stacks of our previous example will be completed up to size 4 in the following way:

\[
\begin{align*}
D(21), & \quad D(21), \quad D(21), \quad Ok(18) \quad \succ \\
D(11), & \quad D(13), \quad Ok(10), \quad Ok(18) \quad \succ \\
D(7), & \quad D(7), \quad Ok(4), \quad Ok(18) \quad \succ \\
D(6), & \quad D(6), \quad Halt(4), \quad Ok(18) \quad \succ \\
D(12), & \quad D(12), \quad D(12), \quad Ok(9) \quad \succ \\
D(0), & \quad D(0), \quad D(0), \quad Exception \quad \succ
\end{align*}
\]

Using this completion of call stacks, the order becomes straightforward: we compare frame’s measures lexicographically, starting from the rightmost part of the list, i.e., from the bottom of the stack. We use the following measure function for frames: \( measure(Ok(i)) = i + 3 \), \( measure(Halt(i)) = i + 2 \), \( measure(D(i)) = i \) and \( measure(Exception) = 1 \).

Thus, on the above example, we have

\[
\begin{align*}
[D(21), D(21), D(21), Ok(18)] & \succ [D(13), D(13), Ok(10), Ok(18)] \succ [D(13), D(13), Ok(10), Ok(18)] \succ
\end{align*}
\]

because the 4th element of the two stacks are equal \( (Ok(18)) \) but the 3rd element of the first stack has a measure of 21 where the 3rd element of the second stack has a measure of 13. Similarly, we have \( [D(21), D(21), Ok(4), Ok(18)] \succ [D(13), D(13), Halt(4), Ok(18)] \) because \( measure(Ok(4)) = 7 \) and \( measure(Halt(4)) = 6 \).

The values for the measure of frames, \( measure(Ok(i)) = i + 3 \), \( measure(Halt(i)) = i + 2 \), \( measure(D(i)) = i \) and \( measure(Exception) = 1 \), have been chosen
so that an Ok frame halting (correctly) with a gas i and moving to a Halt with the same gas value i can be ordered. With this measure, we have \([Ok(i), f_1, \ldots, f_n] \succ [Halt(i), f_1, \ldots, f_n]\), for all \(i \geq 0\) and all frames \(f_1, \ldots, f_n\). This is crucial since this sequence of frame stacks is possible with the EVM semantics.

**Definition 1** (Stack measure). Let \(Es\) be the maximal height of the EVM call stack. Let \(s\) be an EVM call stack represented by a list of frames of the form \(Ok(i), Halt(j), \) or \(Exception\) where \(i,j\) are strictly positive natural numbers. Let \(s(k)\) be the k-th element of the stack \(s\) for \(0 \leq k < |s|\), thus \(s(0)\) is the topmost frame. For \(0 \leq k < |s|\), let

\[
\begin{align*}
  m_k &= \begin{cases} 
  i + 3 & \text{if } s(k) = Ok(i) \\
  i + 2 & \text{if } s(k) = Halt(i) \\
  1 & \text{if } s(k) = Exception 
  \end{cases} \\
  d &= \begin{cases} 
  i + 3 & \text{if } s(0) = Ok(i) \\
  i + 2 & \text{if } s(0) = Halt(i) \\
  0 & \text{if } s(0) = Exception 
  \end{cases}
\end{align*}
\]

The stack measure of \(s\) is a list of natural numbers, of length \(Es\), defined by:

\[
\text{measure}(s) = [d, \ldots, d] \otimes [m_0, \ldots, m_{|s|-1}]
\]

where \(\otimes\) denotes list concatenation.

With this measure, we can prove the following termination theorem.

**Theorem 1.** The execution of any contract on the EVM terminates.

The proof amounts to showing that each EVM execution step results in a decrease of the measure on call stacks defined in Definition 1. To prove this formally, we need to define an abstract version of the EVM semantics specialized for gas analysis. This will be done in the next section where we propose an Isabelle/HOL formalization of this specialized semantics.

### 5.2 Implementation in Isabelle/HOL

The Isabelle datatype for instructions and the type for programs are the following:

```isabelle
type_synonym  datatype instr = Nil 
  | Local "gas" 
  | Jump "gas"

type_synonym  | Call "gas*gas*contractName" 
  pc= nat 
  | Stop

type_synonym  program = "instr list"
```

The abstraction of frames defined in Section 5.1 only keeps track of the gas, the current program to execute, the program counter, and the environment. With this abstraction, many EVM instructions have a similar behavior and can be abstracted by a general Local instruction whose only parameter is its gas cost. The Local\((g)\) instruction represents any instruction whose effect is local to the current frame, does not affect the control flow, and whose cost in gas is the natural number \(g\). This instruction represents all instructions of the families **Execution stack operations**, **Memory access** and **Environment operations** of Section 3, i.e., instructions such as ADD, SSTORE, MSTORE, LT, AND, PUSH, POP, DOP, SWAP, ... The Nil instruction stands for undefined instruction (an undefined opcode) that may appear in a program or the INVALID instruction. The Jump\((g)\) instruction represents the JUMP and JUMPI instructions where \(g\) is the cost of executing the jump. There is no destination associated with the Jump instruction because the abstract semantics will arbitrarily chose the destination when executing the Jump. This is an over-approximation of all the possible JUMP and JUMPI behaviors with any position in the contract tagged by a JUMPDEST instruction. Thus, we cover all the instructions of the **Control flow operations** family of Section 5. The family of **System operations** is represented by two different abstract instructions. The (Call gcall ccall cnal) instruction represent EVM’s CREATE, CALL, CALLCODE, DELEGATECALL, and CALLSTATIC where gcall is the cost in gas of executing the call instruction itself, ccall is the gas transferred to the called contract, and cnal is the contract name to be called. Having CREATE and CALL abstracted by the same Call instruction is coherent with EVM semantics, where the difference between the two is small. In the case of a CALL, the contract name exists in the environment and is associated to a program. In the case of a CREATE the contract name does not exist and the association is added in the environment of the new frame, see (Genet et al., 2020) for details. The last abstract instruction for the family **System operations** is the Stop instruction which represents STOP, RETURN, REVERT and SELFDESTRUCT EVM’s instructions. Finally, a program \(p\) is a list of such instructions and a program counter \(pc\) of \(p\) is a position between 0 and \(length(p) - 1\) in this list.

Note that, in EVM, all instructions (except
STOP, REVERT and RETURN) have a gas cost which is strictly greater than zero. However, the above Isabelle/HOL datatype only imposes that gas costs are of type nat, i.e., that they are greater or equal to zero. Thus, we complement this datatype with a valid_prog(p) predicate stating that, in a program p, every instruction with a cost g is such that g > 0.

The function defining the EVM semantics is smallstep and its Isabelle/HOL type is call_stack ⇒ call_stack. Starting from a call stack, whose top frame is Ok(g,pc,p,e) this function executes the instruction at position pc in p with environment e and returns the resulting call stack. Recall that there are three kinds of frames: Ok, Halt or Exception. The Isabelle/HOL type call_stack is simply a list of frames. Thus, this type includes invalid call stacks, i.e., stacks that contain frames whose program is invalid, and stacks that cannot be produced by a correct execution of the EVM semantics (such as [Exception, Exception]). Since functions in Isabelle/HOL have to be total, we need to define the smallstep function for all stacks including the invalid ones. To ensure totality of smallstep, while preserving its soundness w.r.t. EVM, we map any invalid call stacks to the result stack [Invalid_frame], where Invalid_frame is an additional kind of frame. Here is the corresponding Isabelle/HOL datatype.

datatype
frame = Ok "gas*pc*program*env"
| Exception
| Halt "gas*env"
| Invalid_frame

type_synonym
call_stack = "frame list"

We define a predicate valid_stack checking that a call stack is valid: it contains only valid programs, valid environments and valid sequence of frames. A valid sequence does not contain Invalid_frame, and Exception or Halt cannot be below other frames. We now present the smallstep function of type smallstep::"call_stack ⇒ call_stack" and whose role is to execute the abstract instructions on a call stack. The complete Isabelle/HOL code can be found here (EFSyellow, 2020). Note that this semantics is executable and some examples can be found and run at the end of the theory file. We here only give some excerpts of the smallstep function.

5.3 Semantics for Stop, Nil and Local instructions

The first one illustrates the execution of Stop, Nil and Local instructions. Recall that the Local instruction covers the Execution stack, Memory access and Environment families of operations of Section 3. This code has to be compared with the semantic rules of Section 3.1.

"smallstep ((Ok (g,pc,p,e))#l) =
(case p.(pc) of
  Stop ⇒ ((Halt (g,e))#l) |
  Nil ⇒ (Exception#l))
Local(n) ⇒(if (n>0) then (if (n≤g) then ((Ok ((g-n),pc+1,p,e))#l)
else (Exception#l))
else [Invalid_frame] )

In the case of a Local(n) instruction, if n = 0 this results into a [Invalid_frame]. Otherwise if n is lesser or equal to the available gas g then instruction is executed, gas is updated and pc is incremented. Otherwise, an exception is stacked on the call stack.

5.4 Semantics for the Jump instruction

Now, we present the semantics of the Jump instruction which covers the operations of the Control flow family of Section 3.

"smallstep ((Ok (g,pc,p,e))#l) =
(case p.(pc) of

Jump(n) ⇒
  if (n>0) then
  (let pj= (any_jump 0) in
    if (n≤g) then
      (if (pj<(length p)) then ((Ok(g-n,pj,p,e))#l)
else (Exception#l))
else (Exception#l))
else [Invalid_frame] )

Like above, for Local(n) if n = 0 this results into a [Invalid_frame]. Otherwise we compute an arbitrary value for the destination of the jump, named pj, using the function any_jump. This function is left unspecified, we only known its type any_jump::'a ⇒ nat. Thus, pj= (any_jump 0) associates any natural number to pj. This models the fact that the jump can be conditional and JUMPDEST labels can be attached to any part of the current contract. Then, if there is enough gas to execute the jump (n≤g) and the jump destination is in the range of
the current contract (pj<\langle length p\rangle) then the program counter is updated with pj and the top frame becomes (Ok(g-n,pj,p,e)). Otherwise, an exception is stacked on the call stack.

5.5 Semantics for the CALL return

The semantics of the contract call is straightforward, see (EFYellow, 2020). Thus, the third excerpt, illustrates the return of a contract call. This has to be compared with the second rule of Section 3.3.

When a contract halts correctly (frame (Halt (gend,ef)) on top of the stack, with gas refund gend and environment ef) then if the frame below is a frame (Ok (g,pc,p,e)) such that the instruction at position pc in p is a call, and such that all calling conditions were satisfied before the call, then we pop the Halt frame and continue in the Ok frame, with gas (g+gend-gcall-ccall) at position pc+1 and with (possibly) modified environment ef. Any other behavior results into an [Invalid_frame].

5.6 Soundness and termination proof

Since we completed the EVM semantics with a new type of frames ([Invalid_frame]) to have a total function smallstep, we first need to verify that this modification does not break the EVM semantics encoded in the smallstep function. This can be checked using the following Isabelle/HOL theorem stating that validity of stacks is preserved by smallstep.

lemma validstack_smallstep:
"(valid_stack l) = (valid_stack (smallstep l))"

In other words, when running smallstep on a valid stack, then [Invalid_frame] will never show up. The (complete) execution of a contract starts from a call stack, applies the smallstep function until a Halt, Exception or [Invalid_frame] is reached. The result of a complete execution is a single frame. It is defined in Isabelle/HOL in the execute function as follows:

execute :: "call_stack ⇒ frame"

execute l = (if (length l > stack_lim) then
Invalid_frame
else execute (smallstep l))"

Again, we can lift the previous theorem to prove that adding [Invalid_frame] does not break the semantics, i.e. executing a valid stack always result into a valid stack, where stack_lim is an arbitrary constant (greater than 0) which defines the maximal stack size.

lemma finalSoundnessTheorem:
"(valid_stack l ∧ (length l ≤ stack_lim)) → (valid_stack (execute l))"

Now, we can state and prove in Isabelle/HOL the termination theorem (Theorem 1) which corresponds to the termination proof of the execute function. The proof of this property relies on the measure technique described in section 5.1 extended with measure([Invalid_frame]) = 1 and encoded into Isabelle/HOL. Note that this final termination theorem is valid for any stack size (stack_lim), where the termination measure is the one defined in Section 5.1 and formalized by the list_order Isabelle/HOL function.

termination execute
apply (relation
"measures (list_order stack_lim)"
)

The Isabelle/HOL development is around 1200 lines. Excluding definitions, the proof of soundness is composed of 18 intermediate lemmas and of 300 lines of Isabelle/HOL. The proof of termination is composed of 57 intermediate lemmas and of 400 lines of Isabelle/HOL.

6 TERMINATION PROOF FOR THE EVM REFERENCE IMPLEMENTATIONS SEMANTICS

As explained in the introduction, implementations generally use a slightly different semantics
for the call: \( g \) is retracted to \( c_1 \) at the calling point for \( c_2 \) and \( g_{\text{refund}} \) is added when the control flow returns from \( c_2 \). This is the case for \[ \text{pevm}, 2017 \] (see class BaseCall and class Call(BaseCall)) in \[ https://github.com/ethereum/py-evm/blob/master/eth/vm/logic/call.py \]. Executing Example 2 with this other semantics yields the following sequence of call stacks.

**Example 3.** (1) Assume that we are running a unique contract \( c_1 \) having 18 gas units left, a program counter \( pc \), a program \( p \) and an environment \( e \). The corresponding call stack will thus be \[ \{ Ok(18, pc, p, e) \} \]. (2) Assume that the instruction at position \( pc \) in \( p \) is a CALL to contract \( c_2 \) with a calling gas value of 10, and the cost of a CALL is 3. Then the call stack becomes

\[ \{ Ok(10, 0, pc, p, e) \}, \{ Ok(5, pc, p, e) \} \]

where \( p_2 \) and \( e_2 \) are the program and environment associated to \( c_2 \). (3) Now assume that the instruction at position \( 0 \) in \( p_2 \) consumes 2 gas units, the call stack is now

\[ \{ Ok(8, 1, p_2, e_3) \}, \{ Ok(5, pc, p, e) \} \]

where \( e_2 \) may have been transformed into \( e_3 \). (4) Then, assume that contract \( c_2 \) reaches program point \( pc_2 \) with 4 gas units left and the environment \( e_4 \):

\[ \{ Ok(4, pc_2, p_2, e_4) \}, \{ Ok(5, pc, p, e) \} \]

(5) At \( pc_2 \) in \( p_2 \) there is a RETURN instruction so that \( c_2 \) halts on a valid state. The call stack becomes:

\[ \{ Halt(4, e_4) \}, \{ Ok(5, pc, p, e) \} \]

(6) Then, the frame of contract \( c_2 \) is popped and control is returned back to \( c_1 \) that called \( c_2 \), the 4 gas are refunded to \( c_1 \) and we place the environment \( e_4 \) into \( c_1 \) frame. Thus, the call stack becomes

\[ \{ Ok(9, pc + 1, p, e_4) \} \]

(7) Now we assume that, the execution of contract \( c_1 \) ends with an exceptional state. The resulting stack is thus \[ \{ \text{Exception} \} \].

To prove termination we now need a well-founded strict ordering that satisfy the following ordering constraints:

1. \( \{ Ok(18, pc, p, e) \} \succ \)
2. \( \{ Ok(10, 0, p_2, e_2) \}, \{ Ok(5, pc, p, e) \} \succ \)
3. \( \{ Ok(8, 1, p_2, e_3) \}, \{ Ok(5, pc, p, e) \} \succ \)
4. \( \{ Ok(4, pc_2, p_2, e_4) \}, \{ Ok(5, pc, p, e) \} \succ \)
5. \( \{ Halt(4, e_4) \}, \{ Ok(5, pc, p, e) \} \succ \)
6. \( \{ Ok(9, pc + 1, p, e_4) \} \succ \)
7. \( \{ \text{Exception} \} \succ \)

Note that the ordering used for the previous semantics does not satisfy those constraints. If we complete our stacks up to size 4, we obtain:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
D(21), & D(21), & D(21), & \text{Ok}(18) \\
D(13), & D(13), & \text{Ok}(10), & \text{Ok}(5) \\
D(11), & D(11), & \text{Ok}(8), & \text{Ok}(5) \\
D(7), & D(7), & \text{Ok}(4), & \text{Ok}(5) \\
D(6), & D(6), & \text{Halt}(4), & \text{Ok}(5) \\
D(12), & D(12), & D(12), & \text{Ok}(9) \\
D(0), & D(0), & D(0), & \text{Exception} \\
\end{array}
\]

However, with this second semantics, finding a satisfying termination order is easier. The termination ordering is a lexicographic combination of an order comparing the sum of all gas in the frames, an order comparing the size of the call stack, and finally an order comparing the type of the frame (where \( \text{Ok} > \text{Halt} > \text{Exception} \)). See \[ \text{EFSimplem}, 2020 \] for the complete formalization and Isabelle/HOL proof. The Isabelle/HOL development is around 900 lines. The proof of soundness is very similar to the previous one. The proof of termination is composed of 14 intermediate lemmas and is around 130 lines.

### 7 CONCLUSION

Termination is an important property of any smart contract. To this end, the Ethereum platform (EVM) has introduced a mechanism based on gas which gets consumed as the execution progresses. This paper presents an abstract model of EVM execution that focuses on gas consumption. On this model, we prove that for any EVM execution, gas is used in such a way that it is impossible to construct an infinite loop that does not consume any gas. This property is not immediate to establish for the specification in the EVM Yellow Paper, because of the decidedly non-trivial semantics of contract calls and the fact that cashing-in of the cost of the call is delayed until after the return (whether regular or exceptional).

The proof relies on a non-trivial measure on contract call stacks and has the salient feature that it is independent of the specific costing of instructions, as long as they are greater than 0. This latter point is important as the costs of certain instructions of the EVM has evolved over its rather short life.

The mechanized proof is based on an abstract model of the EVM and fills a gap in current formal developments on verification of contracts.
with proof assistants (Hirai, 2017; Amani et al., 2018). There are a number of steps for further work related to this mechanization. First, it would be worthwhile formalizing the relation to the complete semantic formalization by Grishchenko (Grishchenko et al., 2018a) or even the Isabelle/HOL formalization (Hirai, 2017; Amani et al., 2018). This can likely be done by setting up a simulation relation between the concrete and the abstract semantics. Second, it would be useful to show that the gas consumption in the two semantics are similar or, at least, that the consumption of one is bounded by a polynomial function of the consumption of the other. Another possible extension stems from the fact that this proof is only for one transaction. It does not take into account several transaction rounds.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Emmanuelle Anceaume, Vincent Laporte, Romaric Ludinard, and Clara Schneidewind for valuable discussions about Ethereum and SmartContracts.

REFERENCES


Genet, T., Jensen, T., and Sauvage, J. (2020). Termination of Ethereum’s Smart Contracts. Technical report, Univ Rennes, Inria, CNRS, IRISA. https://hal.inria.fr/hal-02555738


