ESBMC-Solidity: An SMT-Based Model Checker for Solidity Smart Contracts

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ABSTRACT

Smart contracts written in Solidity are programs used in blockchain networks, such as Etherium, for performing transactions. However, as with any piece of software, they are prone to errors and may present vulnerabilities, which malicious attackers could then use. This paper proposes a solidity frontend for the efficient SMT-based context-bounded model checker (ESBMC), named ESBMC-Solidity, which provides a way of verifying such contracts with its framework. A benchmark suite with vulnerable smart contracts was also developed for evaluation and comparison with other verification tools. The experiments performed here showed that ESBMC-Solidity detected all vulnerabilities, was the fastest tool and provided a counterexample for each benchmark. A demonstration is available at https://youtu.be/3UH8_1QAVN0.

CCS CONCEPTS

\bullet Software and its engineering \rightarrow Model checking; Software verification.

KEYWORDS

Formal Verification, Solidity

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1 INTRODUCTION

The blockchain system is a distributed ledger technology that forms the primary mechanism behind Bitcoin, Ethereum, and alternative cryptocurrencies [1]. It can be considered as a singly linked list of blocks [2], where each of them contains a set of unmodifiable transactions. This way, such a technology serves as a distributed tamper-resistant record of such transactions [3]. Ethereum, for instance, can be regarded as a state machine whose global state

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is updated by those transactions, which indeed constitute state transitions.

The transactions are performed by smart contracts, which are programs automatically executed on blockchain networks when specific conditions are met [1], which encode business logic. For instance, such conditions can be an exchange of cryptocurrency or even a process of content unlocking if a digital rights management system is involved. Indeed, transactions act as stimuli to smart contracts. Nevertheless, such contracts must first be written in a given language. In the case of Etherium, smart contracts are written in Solidity, which is an object-oriented language for programs to be run on the Ethereum virtual machine (EVM) [2].

Once deployed, there is no way to update a smart contract except for deleting it entirely and re-deploying a new one. Even a smart contract's author cannot modify the corresponding source code or fix bugs after that [4]. Due to such immutability, it is critical to ensure that a smart contract is secure before its deployment on a blockchain network, such as Ethereum. However, as usually happens to software, smart contracts suffer from vulnerabilities, which represent a risk as malicious attackers often exploit them. As an example, the DAO attack, in 2016, resulted in a monetary loss of more than \$50 million dollars, which forced Ethereum to be hard forked and then rolled back to a previous state [5].

If there can be vulnerabilities, software testing becomes paramount, and the community has already begun to tackle the related problems [6, 7]. However, most approaches target only a limited number of errors, which worsens as new applications appear and the need for specific aspects arises. Consequently, it is essential to employ mature and flexible verifiers, e.g., based on model checking and satisfiability modulo theories (SMT), to check smart contracts. This way, a myriad of problems is already handled, and consequent methodology advancements can be devised faster, including behavior models and specific properties [8].

In that sense, the efficient SMT-based context-bounded model checker (ESBMC) is a good candidate [9, 10]. It is a state-of-the-art (SOTA) checker, which can be extended to support different programming languages and target systems, such as digital filters and controllers, even incorporating behavior models and companion tools [8, 11, 12]. In addition, it was initially devised as a C-language model checker and has been evaluated using standard benchmarks and embedded applications in the telecommunication industry [13– 15]. Recent efforts include the development of a new frontend to verify the most recent C++ standard [16].

This paper tackles the problem raised here, i.e., smart-contract verification, and proposes a frontend for ESBMC based on the newly

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Figure 1: Architectural overview of ESBMC with its extension for verifying Solidity smart contracts. The new frontend takes Solidity JSON AST as input and converts the AST into ESBMC's IR, which is used to generate the symbol table. It then generates the GOTO program, which is symbolically executed to generate the program SSA form. Finally, the logical equations to represent the constraints (C) and properties (P) are created from the SSA form. The SMT solver finds the satisfiability of the equations only when there is a violation of the safety property; otherwise, the smart contract is considered safe up to the bound *k*.

developed Grammar-based Hybrid Conversion methodology explicitly developed for this work. It enables ESBMC to verify Solidity contracts, written in the Solidity language, using its available tools and techniques via two steps. First, we convert Solidity JavaScript object notation (JSON) abstract syntax trees (AST) into the ESBMC's intermediate representation (IR). Second, we integrate with ESBMC's infrastructure middleware and backend to reuse its existing SMTbased verification strategies (incremental and *k*-induction [17]).

In order to evaluate the proposed framework, named ESBMC-Solidity, a benchmark suite with vulnerable smart contracts was created and used as input for it and other SOTA Solidity verification tools: Smartcheck [18], Slither [19], Oyente [20], and Mythril [21]. ESBMC-Solidity outperformed the mentioned verification tools in soundness and performance. Besides, it identified all vulnerabilities, with a counterexample for each, and proved the fastest approach.

2 TOOL DESCRIPTION

2.1 Tool Overview

Fig. 1 illustrates the architecture of ESBMC-Solidity, where the gray box with solid border represents the new frontend, and the white ones constitute the existing ESBMC's components. The gray box with a dashed border indicates an external element for preprocessing smart contracts: the Solidity compiler. It is used for lexical analysis and parsing, taking a smart contract as input and then transforming it into JSON AST, which is done with the argument *--ast-compact-json*.

The proposed approach takes JSON AST and converts each Solidity AST of its nodes into an equivalent IR one, using the ESBMC's *irept*, a tree-structured IR that preserves a program's semantics. Next, each *irept* node is converted into the corresponding symbol and then added to a table, which is translated into a GOTO program. Then, the latter is processed by the symbolic execution engine (*SymEx*) to generate its static single assignment (SSA) form, which is used to generate verification conditions (VCs) $C \land \neg P$, where *C* represents constraints and *P* denotes a safety property. Lastly, ESBMC uses off-the-shelf SMT solvers to verify those VCs' satisfiability. If a property is satisfiable, an execution path leads to a bug in an original Solidity smart contract. Then, when ESBMC detects it, a counterexample is provided, in the form of state traces, to allow its reproduction. It is worth noticing that ESBMC supports several SMT solvers, including Z3 [22], Bitwuzla [23], Boolector [24], MathSAT [25], CVC4 [26], and Yices [27, 28].

2.2 The Grammar-Based Hybrid Conversion Methodology

Given a smart contract as input, the goal of the proposed frontend is to populate the resulting symbol table, where each symbol is represented by the ESBMC's *symbolt* data structure [28]. Furthermore, it shall complete the type-checking procedure of Solidity AST nodes and transform each JSON AST node into its equivalent ESBMC's *irept* one while preserving the associated semantic information. To achieve this goal, we developed this frontend based on the Grammar-Based Hybrid Conversion methodology [29], as an approach specifically devised for that during the development of this work.

Grammar-Based Conversion. The proposed frontend uses the library *nlohmann/json*¹ to process Solidity ASTs in JSON format. When traversing Solidity AST nodes, it uses different functions to transform them into equivalent *irep_t* ones, e.g., *get_var_decl_stmt*, *get_expr*, and *get_statement*, for *variable-declaration-statement*, *expression*, and *statement* nodes, respectively. Besides, each AST node may contain multiple child ones, e.g., the AST node of a *for* loop contains four child nodes: *initialisation*, *condition*, *increment*, and *loop body*. So, during their conversion, the production rules in Solidity grammar documentation are followed [29], so that they are visited in correct order. For instance, the variable-initialisation node of a *for* loop must be visited before the *body* one, as it may be referenced by the latter. If the node for a *body* loop is converted before its variable initialisation, the type checker will fail to handle any reference to it; so, conversion order is guided by production rules.

Hybrid conversion. Three functions must be supported: (1) *assert*() for defining safety properties; (2) *assume*() for defining

¹JSON for Modern C++ - https://github.com/nlohmann/json

constraints; and (3) *nondet* () for assigning non-deterministic values to variables. Consequently, they are implemented by ESBMC as C-style declarations. However, the new frontend works with JSON AST nodes. Besides, since there are more than 70 intrinsic declarations, e.g., forward declarations for nondeterministic types, we instantiate the existing ESBMC's clang frontend to convert those into *irept* nodes to avoid replication, hence generating the symbol table mentioned before. Finally, the latter is further merged with the symbol table generated from the original Solidity AST.

2.3 Illustrative Example

```
// SPDX-License-Identifier: GPL-3.0
  pragma solidity >=0.4.26;
2
  contract MyContract {
3
    uint8 x;
    uint8 sum;
5
    function nondet() public pure
6
       returns(uint8) {
       uint8 i;
      return i;
10
    }
    function __ESBMC_assume(bool)
11
       internal pure { }
12
    function func_sat() external {
13
      x = 0;
14
      uint8 y = nondet();
15
      sum = x + y;
16
       __ESBMC_assume(y < 255);</pre>
17
       __ESBMC_assume(y > 220);
18
       __ESBMC_assume(y != 224);
19
      assert(sum % 16 != 0);
20
    }
21
22 }
```

Figure 2: An example smart contract written in Solidity. In order to instrument the code, the developers need to add the hooks as pure functions in the smart contract. The property is specified using the assert function.

Fig. 2 shows an example of smart-contract verification with ESBMC-Solidity. Indeed, developers can instrument code by adding the hooks, e.g., nondet for nondeterministic integers between 0 and 255 and __ESBMC_assume for additional constraints. Those help developers narrow down the scope for triggering a bug, hence identifying a set of breaking inputs. Function func_sat is the one we need to verify, where two state variables x and sum are defined in lines 4 and 5, respectively, while a safety property indicates that x +y should not be a multiple of 16. In addition, constraints are added using *__ESBMC_assume*, in lines 17, 18, and 19, which restrict *y* as any integer between 220 and 255, but 224. Then, ESBMC will check whether there exists an execution path that satisfies its negation. This way, the verification of *func_sat* becomes a satisfiability problem: given the binary operation expression "sum = x + y", where xis 0 and y is a constrained nondeterministic value, find an execution path where the negation of "sum%16! = 0" is satisfied. ESBMC is then invoked with

esbmc <JSON AST> --function func_sat \ --contract <contract source code> --z3

For the smart contract in Fig. 2, ESBMC generates the *C* and *P* equations as described in Eq. (1) for constraints and Eq. (2) for property. Eq. (1) shows a conjunction of the constraints represented by assignments. When generating its SSA form, ESBMC uses the temporary variable *temp* to represent the left-hand-side of the safety property specified in line 20, which corresponds to the assignment *temp* = *sum*%16 in Eq. (1).

$$C = \begin{bmatrix} y = nondet() \\ \land sum = y \\ \land y! = 224 \\ \land temp = sum\%16 \end{bmatrix}$$
(1)

$$P = \begin{bmatrix} temp \, ! = 0 \end{bmatrix} \tag{2}$$

The resulting VC for satisfiability verification, via SMT solver, is then formed by $C \land \neg P$. Consequently, ESBMC reports a property violation and provides a counterexample that contains a trace of states showing the set of assignments and the breaking values that trigger such violation, where *y* is set with a value 240 as illustrated in Fig. 3.

```
Counterexample:
  State 1 file example.sol line 15 function func_sat
    y = 240
  State 2 file example.sol line 16 function func_sat
    sum = 240
10
  State 6 file example.sol line 20 function func_sat
11
12
  Violated property:
13
14
    file example.sol line 20 function func_sat
    assertion
15
    sum % 16 != 0
16
17
18
  VERIFICATION FAILED
```

Figure 3: ESBMC-Solidity provides the counterexample, showing the breaking value of y, violating the property "sum%16! = 0".

3 EVALUATION AND BENCHMARKS

ESBMC-Solidity, though an early prototype, that yet covers all production rules, can detect vulnerabilities listed in the smart-contract weakness classification (SWC) registry [31]. So, our evaluation aims to answer three questions.

- EQ1 (**soundness**). Is our approach able to report a confirmed bug in a smart contract?
- EQ2 (**performance**). Does our approach find a bug in a reasonable amount of time?
- EQ3 **(bug reproduction)**. Is our approach able to provide a counterexample to help reproduce a specific bug?

TC	SmartCheck		Slither		Oyente		Mythril		ESBMC-Solidity	
	Found	CE	Found	CE	Found	CE	Found	CE	Found	CE
TC1	No	-	No	-	No	-	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
TC2	No	-	No	-	No	-	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
TC3	No	-	No	-	No	-	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
TC4	No	-	No	-	No	-	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
					Failed to					
TC5	Yes	N/A	Yes	N/A	compile	-	Yes	N/A	Yes	N/A
TC6	No	-	No	-	No	-	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
TC7	No	-	No	-	No	-	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
TC8	No	-	No	-	No	-	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Total Time	1.160s		0.519s		1.116s		3.106s		0.183s	

Table 1: Experimental results, where column "Found" indicates whether a bug was detected, followed by column "CE" showing whether a counterexample was provided. The line "Total Time" represents the CPU time [30] used for verification.

3.1 Benchmark Suite Design

A benchmark suite that contains bugs in smart contracts was developed to evaluate ESBMC-Solidity and compare it with other SOTA verification tools [32]. The design of each test case (TC) was guided by the SWC registry [31], as shown in Table 2, while Table 1 shows that all bugs in TCs were detected and confirmed by at least one of the non-ESBMC tools. The test suite and logs are publicly available in Zenodo.²

Table 2: Test case design based on SWC registry [31].

SWC Bug ID	Bug ID Vulnerability	
SWC-101	Integer Overflow	TC1,2
500-101	Integer Underflow	TC3,4
SWC-115	Authorization through tx.origin	TC5
SWC-110	Static array out-of-bounds	TC6
5WC-110	Dynamic array out-of-bounds	TC7,8

3.2 Results

Table 1 shows results for ESBMC-Solidity and other tools. The former found bugs in all TCs confirmed by Mythril, which affirms EQ1. SmartCheck and Slither were able to confirm TC5, which contains a vulnerability reported in the security considerations³, while detected none for the other TCs. Oyente did not find any bug. Mythril, a tool used in the service MythXTM [21], also reported bugs in all TCs.

Apart from TC5, Mythril and the other non-ESBMC tools failed to provide a counterexample for each TC. However, ESBMC-Solidity did, which affirms EQ3. For TC5, a counterexample is not needed, as a tool should only inform that authorization via *tx.origin* must be avoided. One possible reason for the missing counterexamples could be loss of the original Solidity syntax, as tools either use EVM bytecode, e.g., Oyente and Mythril or rely on various forms of IR that do not preserve the original Solidity declaration references needed for state tracing, e.g., SmartCheck and Slither.

²https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5721726

ESBMC-Solidity is the fastest tool, as can be seen in the last line of Table 1, which thus affirms EQ2. Oyente and Mythril work on EVM bytecode and employ simulation for execution path-exploration [33], which might be the reason why they are slower than ESBMC-Solidity. Apart from bug detection, Slither also provides code optimization [19], which might add to the total verification time. To the best of our knowledge, there is no option in Slither to disable the optimization. SmartCheck is implemented in Java, converts Solidity code into an XML-based IR, and uses XPath to query it, while ESBMC-Solidity is implemented purely in C++.

Overall, ESBMC-Solidity presented the best results, reporting bug found in all test cases in 0.183 seconds, faster than other SOTA tools, which answers EQ1 nad EQ2. Regarding the counterexample, ESBMC was the only tool that successfully provided counterexamples for the applicable test cases in our experiment.

4 RELATED WORK

Among the tools we evaluated, Mythril and Oyente use SMT-based symbolic execution to check EVM bytecode and also simulate a virtual machine for execution-path exploration, which might lead to performance degradation [33]. ESBMC-Solidity also uses SMT solvers as backends, but it processes ASTs, so there is no need for environment simulation.

A similar tool that also adopts SMT encoding and solvers to find satisfiability for a property violation is discussed by Alt and Reitwiessner [33]. They developed a component to translate programs into smtlib2 formulae to interface with SMT solvers via their C++ interfaces [33]. The main difference between it and ESBMC-Solidity is that the latter supports code instrumentation, using special functions, which narrows down the scope of inputs that trigger violations. In addition, ESBMC-Solidity can also be extended on top of various existing verification strategies and reasoning techniques provided by ESBMC, such as *k*-induction [17].

5 CONCLUSIONS

We presented ESBMC-Solidity that checks memory safety and userdefined properties in smart contracts written in the Solidity programming language. We evaluated ESBMC-Solidity against other

³https://docs.soliditylang.org/en/v0.8.6/security-considerations.html

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SOTA verification tools and overcame them, confirming all presented bugs and providing the associated counterexamples. Other SOTA tools for solidity cannot provide such a counterexample for the violated properties. Although ESBMC-Solidity is an early prototype, it shows promising results. Our current focus is on providing 100% coverage for the language Solidity, including polymorphism, inheritance, special crypto functions, such as Keccak256 and sha256, and multiple returns.

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