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Bitcoin, Blockchain Technology, and Cryptocurrencies

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Citation

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Bitcoin, Blockchain Technology, and Cryptocurrencies

by

Jeffrey Dodson

Advisor: Professor Steve Nolan

An Honors Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in Information Systems.

> **Sam M. Walton College of Business University of Arkansas Fayetteville, Arkansas**

> > **May 14, 2022**

Table of Contents

Introduction

The blockchain based cryptocurrency known as Bitcoin was theorized in a whitepaper published October 28, 2008, by Satoshi Nakamoto (pseudonym) (Nakamoto, 2008). The paper, titled, "Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System," laid out a digital currency creation/exchange structure that employs a decentralized ledger that would later run on the author's open-source application (Nakamoto, 2008). The main innovation of this technology is found within the security benefits provided by the proof-of-work consensus mechanism that requires solving a mathematic trap-door compression function to verify transactions/blocks added to the blockchain. On January 3, 2009, the genesis block, a term for the first block in any given blockchain, was created using Satoshi's Bitcoin v0.1 software that actualized the concepts in the Bitcoin whitepaper (Bitcoin Core, 2021).

Bitcoin is so well known because it was the first working implementation of decentralized cryptocurrency (Nakamoto, 2008). It also holds the top spot on the list of cryptocurrencies by market capitalization at \$728,484,557,258 USD with a price of \$38,279.11 USD per bitcoin (Blockchain.com, 2022). The first exchange of bitcoin for goods was 10,000 bitcoins for \$41 worth of pizza establishing the initial exchange rate of 0.0041 USD per bitcoin (DeCambre, 2021). With the current exchange rate of \$38,279.11 USD per bitcoin, the 10,000 bitcoins used to buy two Papa John's pizzas would be worth \$382,791,100 USD today. Several relevant charts surrounding bitcoin's evolution to its current state can be found in appendix [C].

This paper's purpose is to explore the innerworkings behind Bitcoin's functionality. Bitcoin has transcended value beyond the bounds of its ledger as seen by trade volume on cryptocurrency to fiat currency exchanges and use as payment for goods and services. It is also clear that cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin have the potential to appreciate over time more than traditional assets, fiat currencies, index funds, or individual stocks. As a growing number of individuals seek to profit from acquiring cryptocurrencies and adopting blockchain technology, there is an increased risk for buying into unproductive blockchain implementations or scams if investors are not aware of certain cybersecurity fundamentals or understanding of how new coins are created. This Bitcoin centered thesis will define essential blockchain terminology, provide descriptions of cryptographic processes, and allow individuals to understand the software/hardware components that are the defining features of Bitcoin's evolving blockchain.

Using Bitcoin the New Way

In the early years of Bitcoin, its supply was in the hands of few. The owners of the currency were likely to have acquired their Bitcoin from CPU mining. There was a list of required actions a user would have to take if they wanted to acquire, request, send, or store Bitcoin. All this prerequisite knowledge and software are no longer necessary as Bitcoin is sold on several centralized exchanges. These exchanges also offer cryptocurrency wallets free to users wanting to buy the various cryptocurrencies listed on exchanges. Users now-a-days can easily buy, sell, send, and store cryptocurrency, but opt to use a third party to connect you to the blockchain making use dependent on an intermediary. These large, centralized exchanges like Coinbase have made cryptocurrency more user friendly, but at the cost of going against some of the fundamental values that Bitcoin's creator initially designed the decentralized currency for.

Summary Statistics

Listed in Table 1 below are some relevant statistics on the top 5 cryptocurrencies by market capitalization. Bitcoin has a higher market capitalization than Ethereum, the second runner up, by roughly a factor of two. While this sounds impressive, the current price is down roughly 45% from its all-time high of \$68,789.63 (Blockchain.com, 2022). Overall, it is easy to see that cryptocurrencies are a rapidly growing and competitive trillion-dollar market. Another insight from Table 1 is that two of the coins are priced at exactly \$1 USD. These are stable coins created to offset the price volatility of Bitcoin and other non-stable coins.

	Top 5 Cryptocurrencies by Market Capitalization (May 1, 2022)									
Rank	Icon	Name	Price	Market Cap	Circulating Supply	ATH				
1		Bitcoin	\$38,279.11	\$728,484,557,258	19,027,781 BTC	\$68,789.63				
$\overline{2}$		Ethereum	\$2,795.67	\$337,418,935,736	120,605,744 ETH	\$4,891.70				
з		Tether	\$1.00	\$83,166,955,578	83,152,877,108 USDT	\$1.22				
4		BNB	\$386.86	\$63,170,415,254	163,276,975 BNB	\$690.93				
		USDC	\$1.00	\$49,273,953,504	49,274,562,120 USDC	\$2.35				

Table 1 (Blockchain.com, 2022)

Bitcoin has an interesting property where the number of coins created in the form of miner's coinbase reward halves every 210,000 blocks (Open-Source Developer Group*, 2021). This means that around the year 2140, there will be no more bitcoins added to the supply and a total of 21,000,000 bitcoins (Open-Source Developer Group*, 2021). On top of that, the difficulty to mine adjusts every 2016 blocks, or roughly every 2 weeks (Open-Source Developer Group*, 2021). As time goes on, miners will earn more from fees than coinbase rewards as seen in appendix [D].

Within Table 2 are several important measures to help understand Bitcoin. I will break down these measures. Currently there are just over 19 million bitcoins in circulation which is 90.61% of all bitcoins that can ever exist based on current protocols (Blockchain.com, 2022). For an in depth look at Bitcoin's supply schedule, see appendix [D]. These bitcoins were at one point rewarded to a Bitcoin miner in the process of adding blocks to the 734,448-block long blockchain (Open-Source Developer Group*, 2021). These blocks contain transactions and create a ledger recording who sent who bitcoins and when. Altogether, this list of transactions amounts to 403.5 gigabytes. Each block is limited at 1 megabyte of data so transactions with higher fees paid to miners will be added before those that offer a low fee to the miner (Nakamoto, 2008). Confirmed in each block on average are 994 new transactions (Blockchain.com, 2022). Unconfirmed transactions sit in a memory pool where miners compile them into blocks and attempt to solve a proof-of-work requirement before other miners. Whoever satisfies the proof-of-work mechanism first wins the coinbase reward for their computer's work in maintaining the ledgers' accuracy and integrity. A miner wins this reward and creates a block roughly every 600 seconds or 10 minutes. The unconfirmed transactions and newly added blocks are pushed across a peer-to-peer network with over 15,000 individual nodes each running the

Bitcoin Core 22.0 software (Bitnodes, 2022). For a better look into the live geo-distribution of active nodes, see appendix [B].

Web Queries from Blockchain.com					
Measure Name	Current Value				
Current Bitcoin Supply	19.027.800				
Number of Blocks	734.448				
Avg Time Between Blocks (s)	509.0				
Avg Time Between Blocks (m)	8.5				
Avg Transactions per Block	994.0				
Percent of Bitcoin Mined	90.61%				
Bitcoin Blockchain Size (Gb)	403.5				
Number of Nodes	15,184				

Table 2 (Blockchain.com, 2022)

Using Bitcoin the Old Way

To understand cryptocurrency at level deeper than knowing how to buy/receive or send bitcoins, it is extremely useful to have the Bitcoin Core node/wallet software installed as a reference. However, I have provided several screenshots of the essential components of the user interface in appendix [A]. Bitcoin Core 22.0 is the most current version of the software that connects a user to the Bitcoin blockchain (Bitcoin Core, 2021). This software is free to download from the Bitcoin developer's website (Bitcoin Core, 2021). This software has several capabilities that allow a person to interact with the Bitcoin blockchain. The primary use of the software is sending and receiving blockchain data using a peer-to-peer network. The second functionality is generating a cryptocurrency wallet that enables a user to send and receive bitcoin transactions. These two functions are built on top of many sub-functions that are variable upon which version of Bitcoin Core that a user is running.

Bitcoin Core 22.0

Bitcoin software has upgraded in an iterative fashion from the version 0.1 software made public in 2009. It has an open-source codebase meaning anyone can view or edit the code running the program. The code is available on GitHub where the full list of 868 contributors and their contributions to the codebase are kept track of (Bitcoin, 2022). The node/wallet software program, known to some as the "Satoshi Client", was initially named Bitcoin, then changed to Bitcoin-Qt, and is currently called Bitcoin Core. For the full list of Bitcoin software version releases, see appendix [F]. The C language code within the program is modified as per the Bitcoin Improvement Proposal process which is often abbreviated as BIP (Bitcoin Core, 2021). The full list of software versions and BIP's for Bitcoin is in Appendix [H].

As stated before, Bitcoin Core is used to connect with the blockchain and other nodes. Table 3 below shows some important measures for how nodes connect with other nodes. All nodes must have an internet connection and an internet protocol address to start with. They connect to a hard coded domain name server to get known node IP addresses. From there, your node will attempt to open 10 connections on transmission control protocol port 8333. To see other examples of TCP Port connections, see appendix [E]. Of those connections, 2 are connections to block relays and 8 are connections to full nodes. See appendix [A] (Peers Node Window) to see these 10 connections. Block relays are nodes that only relay when a new block is added to the blockchain. This helps full nodes know if their blockchain is up to date. With the other 115 incoming connections, nodes can send each other remote process calls. These RPCs are various commands that let nodes query necessary information from other nodes to stay up to

date. The full list of RPCs available to nodes is in appendix [I]. It is important to note that most nodes are still dependent on centralized internet service providers for connection.

Static Values from Most Recent Bitcoin Protocol					
Measure Name	Current Value				
TCP Port	8333				
Number of Peers (Block Relays)					
Number of Peers (Outgoing Full Nodes)	8				
Number of Peers (Incoming Connections)	115				
Max Time for Node to Receive Full New Block	~8 Seconds				

Table 3 (Open-Source Developer Group*, 2021) (Baek, 2021)

The Bitcoin Core software allows a user to set up a cryptocurrency wallet. This process is one of the most vulnerable parts of cryptocurrency. When you create a wallet, you are creating a private public key pair using the properties of an elliptic curve. The math behind this elliptic curve is too complicated to cover in this paper, but I provide a mathematic process flow to generating these key pairs in appendix [J]. The private key is a secret 64-character hexadecimal string which is the encryption key or signing key for transactions (Raj, 2022). This is like a secret passcode and if anyone steals it, then they will be able to send themselves all the user's bitcoins. A public key is a non-secret 64-character hexadecimal string and is a decryption key or verification key (Raj, 2022). A user intentionally shares this so that other nodes can verify when a transaction contains a valid signature. These key pairs can either be saved on a cold storage wallet like an ordinary USB drive or saved in a hot storage wallet where a third party like Coinbase.com stores a user's balance, transactions, and encryption keys (Raj, 2022).

Mining

Mining is the process of satisfying the proof-of-work consensus mechanism created in the Nakamoto whitepaper. When a node is said to mine, they are running the Secure Hashing Algorithm 256 (Raj, 2022). This algorithm takes advantage of the same elliptic curve properties as private public key pair creation used for cryptocurrency wallets (Raj, 2022). Table 4 and 5 show some interesting statistics about the SHA 256 algorithm. This algorithm will take in inputs and spit out a random seeming unique deterministic output that is 256 bits long as long as the input is smaller than the finite field of the elliptic curve used in the SHA 256 algorithm or 2^64 bits (Raj, 2022). Table 4 measure 1 and 2 show the number of unique outputs to the hashing function.

			Hashing Measures
Measure Name	Definition	Value	
2^256 Unique Combinations of Binary Output	0 or 1		
16^64 Unique Combinations of Hexidecimal Output	$0-9$ or a-f		
Typical Hashes per Second Range for CPU			1,000-20,000
Typical Hashes per Second Range for GPU			10,000,000-60,000,000
Typical Hashes per Second Range for ASIC			1,000,000,000,000-100,000,000,000,000
Current Network Hash Rate per Second			245,860,613,763,000,000,000
Blocks Between Difficulty Adjustments			2016 (Roughtly 2 Week Intervals)
Probability of Correct Hash (Guess)			0.0000000000000000000001%

Table 4 (Open-Source Developer Group*, 2021) (Cryptopedia, 2021)

Mining blocks and getting a reward known as a coinbase, currently 6.25 bitcoins plus transaction fees included in the block mined, is done by brute-force guessing inputs into the SHA 256 algorithm (Raj, 2022). Table 4 above shows the probability of getting a correct guess per

attempt is very low. Different computers can perform more guesses per second. The fastest ASIC miners perform the algorithm up to 100 trillion times per second. Table 5 below shows a series of inputs and outputs to the SHA 256 algorithm to explain what the goal of mining is. For binary conversion tables, see appendix [G]. Each input produces a seemingly random but deterministic output. Miners attempt to get an output that begins with a certain number of zeros. Currently the difficulty requires miners to get an output of 19 leading zeros. The number of leading zeros determines the difficulty of the network. All the miners in the network currently 220 million terrahashes per second (Blockchain.com, 2022). A terrahash is a trillion hashes per second. So that's 2.2e+20 hashes per second. This difficulty is updated every 2016 added blocks so that blocks are added at a rate of 1 every 10 minutes no matter how many miners are on the network (Nakamoto, 2008).

Secure Hashing Algorithm- Input to 256 Bit Output							
Input	Funtion	Output Type	Output	Length			
Input	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	59a513a31d7ddca35e18069758d0e1eab4b9d0109c583419b622ec8b5cebffcb	64			
Input1	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	c9a28cb6bcf4f2b6d944579278e90bc0d001fdb88a32b874891de6c119b3a946	64			
Input2	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	54f194e065e9bb36218955e86a2d3abbcad506b126b86c9381c6a91d6b9d58c7	64			
SecretPassword	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	2a8e9faf6b65c79233feaf2de6960888ce60987057effd87af94f81e6b76f8b8	64			
$\overline{0}$	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	5c56c2883435b38aeba0e69fb2e0e3db3b22448d3e17b903d774dd5650796f76	64			
	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	28902a23a194dee94141d1b70102accd85fc2c1ead0901ba0e41ade90d38a08e	64			
$\overline{2}$	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	729577af82250aaf9e44f70a72814cf56c16d430a878bf52fdaceeb7b4bd37f4	64			
3	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	8491452381016cf80562ff489e492e00331de3553178c73c5169574000f1ed1c	64			
39	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	03fd5ff1048668cd3cde4f3fb5bde1ff306d26a4630f420c78df1e504e24f3c7	64			
990	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	0001e3a4583f4c6d81251e8d9901dbe0df74d7144300d7c03cab15eca04bd4bb	64			
52,117	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	0000642411733cd63264d3bedc046a5364ff3c77d2b37ca298ad8f1b5a9f05ba	64			
1,813,152	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	00000c94a85b5c06c9b06ace1ba7c7f759e795715f399c9c1b1b7f5d387a319f	64			
19,745,650	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	000000cdccf49f13f5c3f14a2c12a56ae60e900c5e65bfe1cc24f038f0668a6c	64			
243,989,801	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	0000000ce99e2a00633ca958a16e17f30085a54f04667a5492db49bcae15d190	64			
856,192,328	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	000000000000000000067a478024addfecdc93628978aa52d91fabd4292982a50	64			
2E99F445C007A9158207CC30CEBAD2B3D26C45FDAB2EBDF50D261335FC00D92C	SHA 256	Hexadecimal	000000000000000000095913f2dc133348dcbc4fcac513e66847fd4cee7149da	64			

Table 5 (ETH.BUILD, 2022)

Miners brute-force their guess in what's known as a nonce. Appendix [K] shows a miner forming a block header with a successful hash output. The header has a version, Merkle root, hash of the previous block, nonce, bits, time, and the output hash with the correct number of leading zeros. The version is a number associated with BIP's, the Merkle root is the hash at the top of the Merkle tree for all the verified transactions in the block, the time is a timestamp value for when the algorithm was attempted, and bits/nonce are values that a miner can change to attempt to get the rest of the information in the header to input into the SHA 256 algorithm and output a hash beginning with the required number of leading zeros.

Because of how rare a correct guess is, it is rare that more than one miner gets a correct guess before getting the signal that another miner has guessed correctly before they did. But when this happens, a fork is created. Nodes receive two correct solutions to the SHA 256 algorithm. The fork that has the longest blockchain always takes priority and will resolve within the next few blocks added to the chain. Miners prove that they have done computational work by solving the SHA 256 algorithm at a specified difficulty making it impossible to corrupt the blockchain without more than 50% of the mining computing power (Raj, 2022). When a block is added, the transactions are solidified, and a new block is ready to be filled with new transactions. The difficult mining process is what's known as a consensus mechanism for the Bitcoin decentralized ledger and is the principal security behind Bitcoin's blockchain. This is what Satoshi called a proof-of-work chain (Nakamoto, 2008). See appendix [L] for a visual of a blockchain.

Conclusion

Bitcoin went from a fad to being worth more than the market cap of Facebook in just 13 short years. However, it failed to be what Satoshi Nakamoto wanted it to be. The creator of the first cryptocurrency wanted to cut out intermediaries like central banks or credit card companies. They wanted a cheap, peer-to-peer, decentralized ledger system to do daily transactions. With transaction fees peaking at \$60 to send a transaction, the cryptocurrency became more of a speculative asset to buy and sell (Blockchain.com, 2022). Moreover, the fact that it is mainly traded on centralized exchanges and mining pools dominate the mining process speaks to the failure to cut out large intermediaries. However, bitcoin is a good store of value compared to come coins because it has a finite supply. It is being adopted by many financial institutions and businesses and has become ubiquitous among everyday investors. Bitcoin is in an evolutionary state. Blockchains are complicated, ever-changing, versatile, disruptive, and have the potential to change the long-term landscape of transaction validation and show that individuals can use decentralized networks and open-source applications to take the place of the services governments, businesses, and firms have historically provided and controlled.

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Appendix

[A] Bitcoin Core 22.0 UI

[B] Bitnodes.io Map

REACHABLE BITCOIN NODES 15320 nodes as of Sun May 1 16:21:24 2022 EDT

2. United States (1942) 5. Netherlands (350) 8. Finland (222) 11. Singapore (121) 14. Japan (101) 17. Hong Kong (65) 20. Brazil (55) 23. Poland (46) 26. Korea, Republic of (42) 29. Belgium (31) 32. Hungary (23) 35. New Zealand (20) 38. Thailand (18) 41. Slovenia (14) 44. Greece (12) 47. Turkey (11) 50. Vietnam (10) 53. Chile (8) 56. Serbia (5) 59. Iran, Islamic Republic of (5) 62. Ecuador (4) 65. United Arab Emirates (3) 68. Jersey (2) 71. Uruguay (2) 74. Kyrgyzstan (2) 77. Seychelles (2) 80. Azerbaijan (2) 83. Belize (1) 86. Venezuela (1) 89. Zimbabwe (1) 92. El Salvador (1) 95. Lebanon (1) 98. Aland Islands (1)

3. Germany (1455) 6. Canada (312) 9. Russian Federation (220) 12. China (113) 15. Czech Republic (87) 18. Spain (62) 21. Italy (54) 24. Lithuania (46) 27. Austria (39) 30. Norway (29) 33. Portugal (23) 36. Slovakia (20) 39. South Africa (16) 42. Denmark (14) 45. Estonia (11) 48. Latvia (11) 51. Iceland (9) 54. Luxembourg (7) 57. Colombia (5) 60. Belarus (4) 63. Malta (3) 66. Indonesia (3) 69. Gibraltar (2) 72. Isle of Man (2) 75. Cambodia (2) 78. Andorra (2) 81. Qatar (2) 84. Guatemala (1) 87. Puerto Rico (1) 90. Mauritius (1) 93. Dominican Republic (1) 96. Saint Lucia (1) 99. Mozambique (1)

[C] Blockchain.com Graphs

Unspent Transaction Outputs

The total number of valid unspent transaction outputs. This excludes invalid UTXOs with opcode OP_RETURN

Total Hash Rate (TH/s)

The estimated number of terahashes per second the bitcoin network is performing in the last 24 hours.

The average time for a transaction with miner fees to be included in a mined block and added to the public ledger.

Fees Per Transaction (USD)

Average transaction fees in USD per transaction.

[E] Common Ports

[F] Bitcoin Core Version History

[G] Binary Conversion Tables

Binary

f 1111

[H] Bitcoin Improvement Proposals Bitcoin Improvement Proposal List (Bitcoin.org)

[I] Remote Process Calls

[J] Elliptic Curve Cryptography Math

[K] Secure Hashing Algorithm 256 Example

