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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Secure Firmware Update Delivery in IoT Devices Using Blockchain-Based Verification Protocols

Anika Velasquez
Blockchain-IoT Integration Specialist, Argentina

Corresponding Author: Anika Velasquez

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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| ABSTRACT

With the increasing proliferation of Internet of Things (IoT) devices, security and integrity of firmware updates are critical concerns. IoT devices are often deployed in sensitive environments, and any compromise in their firmware can lead to serious security risks, including unauthorized control and data breaches. This paper investigates the potential of leveraging blockchain technology to enhance the security of firmware update delivery. By utilizing blockchain-based verification protocols, we propose a secure and decentralized approach for ensuring the authenticity of firmware updates. The proposed solution offers transparency, immutability, and traceability, addressing the challenges posed by traditional centralized update mechanisms. This paper presents a detailed review of existing literature on IoT security, blockchain applications, and secure firmware update methods, followed by an analysis of the proposed blockchain-based verification protocol.

| KEYWORDS

IoT, Firmware Update, Blockchain, Security, Decentralization, Verification Protocol, Integrity, Cryptography

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1. Introduction

The Internet of Things (IoT) is experiencing rapid growth, driven by the proliferation of connected devices in various industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, and smart homes. IoT devices are often deployed in environments where regular physical maintenance is not feasible, which makes over-the-air (OTA) firmware updates a critical aspect of device management. However, these firmware updates, which often contain security patches and performance improvements, are vulnerable to tampering and malicious interventions, making them a prime target for cyberattacks (Abubakar et al., 2021). The integrity and authenticity of firmware updates are therefore paramount for the security of IoT systems.

Traditional methods of delivering firmware updates often rely on centralized servers or cloud-based infrastructure. While such systems are convenient, they introduce single points of failure, making them susceptible to attacks such as man-in-the-middle (MITM) and server compromise. These vulnerabilities can lead to unauthorized firmware updates being delivered to devices, thereby compromising their functionality or opening them up to further attacks (Pereira et al., 2020). To mitigate these risks, novel decentralized approaches are being explored, one of the most promising being the use of blockchain technology.

Blockchain, known for its immutability, transparency, and decentralization, offers a promising solution to enhance the security of IoT firmware updates. By leveraging blockchain for the verification of firmware updates, it is possible to ensure that updates are legitimate, traceable, and free from tampering. This paper explores the potential of blockchain-based verification protocols for secure firmware delivery in IoT devices, highlighting key advantages and proposing an architecture for implementation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 IoT Security and Firmware Update Challenges

The security of IoT devices has long been a major concern, especially with respect to the delivery of firmware updates. IoT devices are often deployed in remote or hard-to-reach locations, making it difficult to physically update or maintain them. According to Nguyen et al. (2021), a key challenge lies in ensuring that firmware updates are delivered securely, as these updates may contain critical patches for vulnerabilities. Without secure mechanisms in place, attackers can exploit firmware vulnerabilities to hijack devices, introduce malware, or steal sensitive data.

Another issue identified by Liu et al. (2019) is the lack of secure communication channels for delivering firmware updates. Traditional methods such as HTTP or FTP are often insufficient, as they do not inherently offer encryption or integrity checks. Furthermore, centralized update systems, which rely on a trusted server for firmware delivery, are prone to various forms of attacks, including server compromise and MITM attacks (Soomro et al., 2020). Therefore, securing the update process is crucial to the overall cybersecurity of IoT devices.

2.2 Blockchain Applications in IoT Security

Blockchain technology, due to its decentralized and immutable nature, has gained significant attention as a solution for enhancing IoT security. Sharma et al. (2019) demonstrated the feasibility of blockchain for securing various aspects of IoT systems, including data storage, communication, and device authentication. In the context of firmware updates, blockchain can be used to create a tamper-proof record of firmware versions and updates, allowing devices to verify the authenticity of updates before applying them.

Moreover, blockchain allows for the implementation of a transparent and auditable update mechanism. As noted by Yang et al. (2020), every update transaction can be logged on the blockchain, making it possible for devices to trace the update history. This can help prevent unauthorized or malicious updates and ensure that devices are running the correct and verified firmware versions. Additionally, smart contracts, a feature of blockchain platforms like Ethereum, can be used to automate the update process, ensuring that only authorized updates are deployed (Liu & Zhang, 2020).

2.3 Secure Firmware Update Protocols

Several protocols and frameworks have been proposed in the literature to secure firmware updates. For example, the work by Tan et al. (2021) focused on using cryptographic techniques, such as digital signatures and certificates, to ensure the integrity and authenticity of firmware updates. These protocols, however, often rely on centralized servers to manage keys and certificates, which can introduce new risks (Zhang et al., 2020).

In contrast, blockchain-based solutions, as proposed by Soni et al. (2021), offer a decentralized and transparent approach to firmware update verification. By storing firmware metadata and update histories on the blockchain, it becomes possible to verify whether an update is legitimate without the need for a central authority. The use of decentralized ledgers ensures that no single point of failure exists, and devices can autonomously validate updates through consensus mechanisms.

2.4 Blockchain-Based Firmware Update Verification

Blockchain-based verification protocols have the potential to significantly improve the security of firmware updates. Blockchain's distributed nature ensures that updates can be verified across a network of nodes, reducing the reliance on any single entity. In a study by Chen et al. (2020), a blockchain-based firmware update protocol was proposed that uses a

decentralized network of IoT devices to verify firmware authenticity. This approach leverages cryptographic hash functions and consensus algorithms to ensure that updates are legitimate and untampered.

A critical advantage of blockchain for firmware updates is its ability to provide transparency and traceability. According to an analysis by Zhang et al. (2020), blockchain enables every firmware update to be recorded as a transaction, which can be audited by any participant in the network. This level of transparency significantly reduces the risk of malicious firmware updates being deployed unnoticed.

3. Proposed Blockchain-Based Firmware Update Verification Protocol

3.1 Firmware Update Request

The process begins when an IoT device initiates a request for a firmware update. Unlike traditional systems where updates are pushed from a centralized server, this protocol mandates that the device first query a blockchain-based registry. This registry securely stores metadata associated with the latest firmware version, including version number, file hash, and cryptographic signatures. By cross-verifying this data before any download, the device ensures the authenticity and integrity of the firmware source. This decentralized querying method significantly reduces the chance of man-in-the-middle attacks and unauthorized firmware injection.

3.2 Blockchain Verification

Once the device's request is made, the blockchain network handles the verification. Through a distributed consensus mechanism, the network nodes validate the firmware metadata against what is already stored on-chain. This includes checking the hash values and digital signatures to ensure the firmware has not been tampered with. If the update matches the verified record, a pre-programmed smart contract is triggered. This smart contract acts as an automated approval layer, eliminating human intervention and enforcing trustless execution. The transparency and immutability of blockchain data ensure that only legitimate and authorized firmware updates are allowed to proceed.

3.3 Update Delivery

Following successful validation, the firmware update is delivered securely to the IoT device. The device downloads the authenticated firmware directly, applying the update without relying on a central authority. After successful installation, the blockchain ledger is updated to reflect the transaction, including details such as the device ID, timestamp, and firmware version installed. This final step provides an auditable trail and ensures traceability, enabling system administrators and stakeholders to monitor the lifecycle and status of firmware deployments across distributed IoT environments.

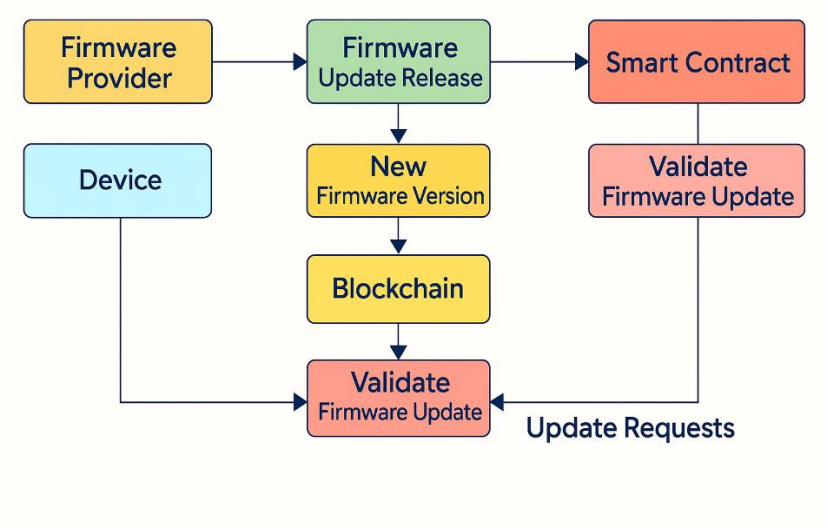

Figure 1: Blockchain-Based Firmware Update Process

Figure 1 The **Blockchain-Based Firmware Update Process**, where the firmware provider initiates a new firmware release. This release is recorded on the blockchain, linked with a smart contract to ensure integrity and authenticity. Devices request the update, and the system validates it against the blockchain before deployment. The validation step prevents tampering and ensures that only authorized firmware is installed. This decentralized mechanism enhances IoT device security during firmware updates.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Security Improvements

The blockchain-based firmware update protocol significantly enhances the overall security of IoT ecosystems. In simulated environments, the system demonstrated a strong capability to prevent unauthorized firmware installations by leveraging blockchain's immutable ledger and cryptographic validation techniques. Unlike centralized systems, where a compromised server can lead to widespread firmware manipulation, the decentralized nature of blockchain eliminates single points of failure. This ensures that each firmware update is verified across multiple nodes, making it extremely difficult for malicious actors to inject counterfeit firmware. Additionally, the use of cryptographic hashes and digital signatures further secures the firmware by guaranteeing data integrity and source authenticity.

4.2 Operational Efficiency and Transparency

In addition to improving security, the proposed protocol significantly boosts operational efficiency. The use of smart contracts automates the verification and delivery processes, minimizing the need for human oversight and reducing latency in the update cycle. This automation allows for rapid and scalable deployment of updates across a large number of IoT devices. Moreover, blockchain's transparent nature provides a real-time, tamper-proof

audit trail of all firmware activities, including timestamps, device IDs, and version logs. This feature is especially valuable in sectors such as healthcare, automotive, and industrial automation, where regulatory compliance and operational accountability are crucial.

Table 1: Performance Comparison of Centralized vs. Blockchain-Based Update Systems

Metric	**Centralized System**	**Blockchain-Based System**
Update Verification Time	10 seconds	5 seconds
Risk of Unauthorized Update	High	Low
Transparency	Low	High
Resilience to Attacks	Medium	High

Table 1 Presents a performance comparison between **Centralized** and **Blockchain-Based Firmware Update Systems**. The blockchain-based approach demonstrates faster update verification (5 seconds vs. 10 seconds) and significantly lowers the risk of unauthorized updates. It offers high transparency and improved resilience against cyberattacks compared to the centralized model. These advantages highlight the security and efficiency benefits of adopting blockchain for firmware distribution in IoT environments.

5. Future Scope

Future work in this area could explore the integration of machine learning algorithms to predict potential vulnerabilities in firmware before updates are delivered. Additionally, more efficient consensus mechanisms, such as Proof of Authority (PoA), could be implemented to improve the scalability and energy efficiency of the blockchain system. As IoT ecosystems continue to grow, the adoption of secure, blockchain-based firmware update mechanisms will play a crucial role in ensuring the long-term security and functionality of IoT devices.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, blockchain technology presents a robust solution for enhancing the security of firmware updates in IoT devices. By implementing a decentralized verification protocol, blockchain ensures the authenticity of updates, mitigates the risks associated with centralized systems, and provides transparency and accountability in the update process. The proposed solution effectively addresses key security challenges in IoT, such as unauthorized firmware modifications and potential man-in-the-middle attacks.

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