CSci 4271W
Development of Secure Software Systems
Day 7: Memory safety defenses and counter-attacks

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Outline

Exploiting other vulnerabilities, cont'd

W⊕X (DEP)

Return-oriented programming (ROP)

ROP shellcoding exercise

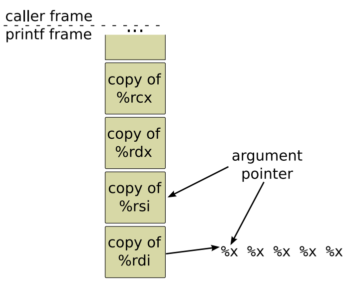
Null pointer dereference

- Add offset to make a predictable pointer
  - On Windows, interesting address start low
- Allocate data on the zero page
  - Most common in user-space to kernel attacks
  - Read more dangerous than a write

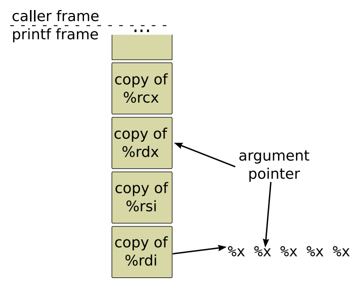
Format string attack

- Attacker-controlled format: little interpreter
- Step one: add extra integer specifiers, dump stack
  - Already useful for information disclosure

Format string attack layout



Format string attack layout



Format string attack: overwrite

- `%n` specifier: store number of chars written so far to pointer arg
- Advance format arg pointer to other attacker-controlled data
- Control number of chars written with padding
- On x86, can use unaligned stores to create pointer

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Basic idea

- Traditional shellcode must go in a memory area that is
  - writable, so the shellcode can be inserted
  - executable, so the shellcode can be executed
- But benign code usually does not need this combination
- W xor X, really $\neg(W \wedge X)$

Non-writable code, $X \rightarrow \neg W$

- E.g., read-only .text section
- Has been standard for a while, especially on Unix
- Lets OS efficiently share code with multiple program instances

Non-executable data, $W \rightarrow \neg X$

- Prohibit execution of static data, stack, heap
- Not a problem for most programs
  - Incompatible with some GCC features no one uses
  - Non-executable stack opt-in on Linux, but now near-universal

Implementing $W \oplus X$

- Page protection implemented by CPU
  - Some architectures (e.g. SPARC) long supported $W \oplus X$
- x86 historically did not
  - One bit controls both read and execute
  - Partial stop-gap "code segment limit"
- Eventual obvious solution: add new bit
  - NX (AMD), XD (Intel), XN (ARM)

One important exception

- Remaining important use of self-modifying code: just-in-time (JIT) compilers
  - E.g., all modern JavaScript engines
- Allow code to re-enable execution per-block
  - `mprotect`, `VirtualProtect`
  - Now a favorite target of attackers

Counterattack: code reuse

- Attacker can't execute new code
- So, take advantage of instructions already in binary
- There are usually a lot of them
- And no need to obey original structure

Classic return-to-libc (1997)

- Overwrite stack with copies of:
  - Pointer to libc's `system` function
  - Pointer to `"/bin/sh"` string (also in libc)
- The `system` function is especially convenient
- Distinctive feature: return to entry point

Chained return-to-libc

- Shellcode often wants a sequence of actions, e.g.
  - Restore privileges
  - Allow execution of memory area
  - Overwrite system file, etc.
- Can put multiple fake frames on the stack
  - Basic idea present in 1997, further refinements

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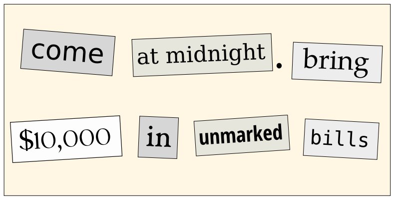
Pop culture analogy: ransom note trope



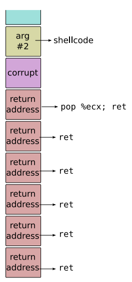
Basic new idea

- Treat the stack like a new instruction set
- "Opcodes" are pointers to existing code
- Generalizes return-to-libc with more programmability
- Academic introduction and source of name: Hovav Shacham, ACM CCS 2007

ret2pop (Nergal, Müller)

- Take advantage of shellcode pointer already present on stack
- Rewrite intervening stack to treat the shellcode pointer like a return address
  - A long sequence of chained returns, one pop

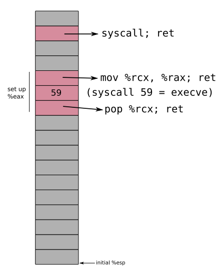
ret2pop (Nergal, Müller)



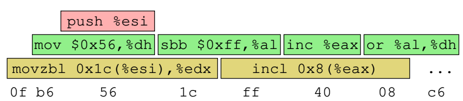
Gadgets

- Basic code unit in ROP
- Any existing instruction sequence that ends in a return
- Found by (possibly automated) search

Another partial example



Overlapping x86 instructions



- Variable length instructions can start at any byte
- Usually only one intended stream

Where gadgets come from

- Possibilities:
  - Entirely intended instructions
  - Entirely unaligned bytes
  - Fall through from unaligned to intended
- Standard x86 return is only one byte, 0xc3

Building instructions

- String together gadgets into manageable units of functionality
- Examples:
  - Loads and stores
  - Arithmetic
  - Unconditional jumps
- Must work around limitations of available gadgets

Hardest case: conditional branch

- Existing jCC instructions not useful
- But carry flag CF is
- Three steps:
  1. Do operation that sets CF
  2. Transfer CF to general-purpose register
  3. Add variable amount to `%esp`

Further advances in ROP

- Can also use other indirect jumps, overlapping not required
- Automation in gadget finding and compilers
- In practice: minimal ROP code to allow transfer to other shellcode

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Setup

- Key motivation for ROP is to disable $W \oplus X$
- Can be done with a single syscall, similar to `execve` shellcode
- Your exercise for today: put together such shellcode from a limited gadget set
- Puzzle/planning aspect: order to avoid overwriting