Exploit Defenses:
ASLR, W⊕X, TaintCheck

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Host-Based Exploit Defenses

- Firewalls: defenses against worms in-network
  - Can see lots of traffic at one monitoring point
  - Can filter traffic for many vulnerable hosts
  - Limited information available: only packet fields, payload contents

- Today: identifying and defending against exploits (and so against worms) on hosts
  - Much more information: see effect of network request on running process’s execution!
  - Potentially more accurate
  - Requires changes to host software
  - Performance concern; don’t want to slow busy server
Outline

• **W+X** page protections  
  – and limitations

• **Address Space Layout Randomization**  
  – and limitations

• **TaintCheck**  
  – and limitations
Goals for Host-Based Exploit Defenses

• Works on executables
  – ...and so for legacy code
  – Source code often not available
• Prevents broadest possible range of exploits
• Low/no false positives, false negatives
• Minimal performance reduction
  – Server operator won’t want to sacrifice performance
  – Attacker may recognize server protected if performance slows—and not send malicious request!
W⊕X Page Protections

• Recall from OS: CPU implements page protection in hardware
  – For each 4K memory page, permission bits specified in page table entry in kernel: read, write

• Central problem in many exploits:
  – Code supplied by user in input data
  – Execution transferred to user’s input data

• **Idea: don’t let CPU execute instructions stored in data pages**
  – i.e., each page should either be writable or executable, but not both: W⊕X
  – Text pages: X, not W
  – Data (stack, heap) pages: W, not X
W⊕X Details

- Originally no X bit in Intel CPUs; just R and W; all R pages implicitly X
- AMD and Intel introduced “NX” bit (no execute); available on today’s processors (in PAE mode)
  - Not a new idea; present in, e.g., DEC Alpha
  - Used by Linux PaX and Windows XP SP2
- Linux PaX implements W⊕X for x86 processors without NX bit hardware
  - Based on segment limit registers
  - Halves address space available to each process
  - Minor performance reduction
- W⊕X breaks just-in-time (JIT) code generation in legacy applications!
W+X Hole: Return-to-libc Attacks

- Instead of putting shellcode on stack, can put args there, overwrite return address with pointer to well known library function
  - e.g.,
    ```c
    system("/bin/sh");
    ```
- Return-to-libc attack
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Address Space Layout Randomization (ASLR)

- Central observation: attacker must predict addresses
  - e.g., shellcode buffer address, libc function address, string argument address

- Idea: randomize addresses in process
  - With high probability, attacker will guess wrong
  - Jump to unmapped memory: crash
  - Jump to invalid instruction stream: crash

- Useful as efficient exploit detector
  - Memory faults or illegal instructions suggest exploit
ASLR Implementation: PaX for Linux

- Linux process contains three memory regions:
  - **Executable:** text, init data, uninit data
  - **Mapped:** heap, dynamic (shared) libraries, thread stacks, shared memory
  - **Stack:** user stack
- ASLR adds random offset to each area when process created
  - **Efficient:** easily supported by virtual memory hardware
  - 16, 16, 24 bits randomness, respectively
- Mapped offset **limited to 16 bits**
  - bits 28-31 cannot be changed; **would interfere with big mmap()s**
  - bits 0-12 cannot be randomized; **would make mmap()ed pages not be page-aligned**
Derandomization Attack on ASLR
[Shacham, Boneh et al.]

- 16 bits not that big; try to guess random offset added to mapped area
- Once know random offset, can predict addresses of shared libraries
  - thus libc function addresses
  - ...so can mount return-to-libc attack
- Two phases:
  - brute-force random offset to mapped area
  - compute “derandomized” address of syscall(), use in return-to-libc attack
Derandomization Attack Details

• Target: “classic” stack buffer overflow placed in Apache web server

```c
char buf[64];
...
strcpy(buf, input);
```

• Plan:
  – Try to return to usleep(), guessing random offset for mapped area each time
  – If guess wrong, target process crashes, closes connection immediately; parent forks new child (with same random offset)
  – If guess right, target process delays in usleep(), then crashes and closes connection immediately
Derandomization Attack: Phase 1

- Know offset of `usleep()` within libc, know base of mapped area (w/o randomization)
- Each return address guess: base + `usleep()` offset + guess in [0, 64K]
- If guess wrong, crash
- If guess right, `usleep()` sees return address 0xdeadbeef, arg 16,843,009 usec (16 sec); sleep, crash
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  \[\text{base} + \text{usleep()} \text{ offset} + \text{guess in [0, 64K]}\]
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- Each return address guess:
  - `base + usleep() offset + guess in [0, 64K]`
- If guess wrong, **crash**
- If guess right, `usleep()` sees return address `0xdeadbeef`, arg 16,843,009 usec (16 sec);
  `sleep`, **crash**
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- Each return address guess:
  - `base + usleep() offset + guess in [0, 64K]`
- If guess wrong, **crash**
- If guess right, `usleep()` sees return address `0xdeadbeef, arg 16,843,009 usec (16 sec); sleep, crash`
Derandomization Attack: Phase 2

- Now know random offset of mapped area
- Compute exact address of system() libc function:
  \[ \text{address} = \text{base} + \text{system()} \text{ offset in libc} + \text{guessed random offset} \]
- Perform return-to-libc attack using system(), as in earlier example; “/bin/sh” in buf[] on stack
- Turns out caller’s frame contains pointer to buf[]!
- So overwrite stack past buf[] with several copies of address of any ret instruction found in libc, followed by address of system()
  - Repeatedly pops stack until returns to system(), with pointer to buf[] on top of stack (argument position)
  - Details in paper, top of p. 8
Derandomization Attack: Performance

- Many trials of phase 1 necessary to learn random offset of mapped area on server
- For 1.8 GHz AMD Athlon server, attacked by 2.4 GHz Pentium 4 client:
  - 216 seconds on average to complete both phases
  - 200 bytes of traffic per probe; 12.8 MB data from client worst-case, 6.4 MB data in expectation
Can ASLR Be Made More Robust?

• 64-bit CPU architectures
  – Probably 40 bits of random offset; much harder to brute-force without attracting attention; so some help with new hardware

• Re-randomize address space after every crash (probe)
  – For single randomization at startup, expected number of probes: $2^{n-1}$
  – For re-randomized n-bit random offset, expected number of probes: $2^n$
  – Only twice as many probes needed as in attack when randomizing once at start!
  – Not promising...
TaintCheck: Detecting Exploits by Analyzing Server Execution

• Approach: instrument program to monitor its own execution, detect when exploit occurs

• Goals:
  – Work on binaries (no source code required)
  – Low false positives/false negatives
  – Detect wide range of exploits (new varieties all the time; point solutions unconvincing)
  – Help humans understand how exploit worked, after the fact; how did data flow from malicious input to point of exploit?
TaintCheck: Basic Execution Monitoring Idea

• Many exploits use data supplied by user (or derived from data supplied by user) to subvert control flow of program
  – Need to modify jump, call instruction target addresses, or function return addresses

• During execution, before any control transfer instruction, validate target address not derived from user-supplied data
  – If it is, exploit detected; raise alarm
  – If it isn’t, continue execution normally
Tainting User Input and Data Derived from It

• User is the source of exploits; don’t trust data from him
• Mark all data from user (received from network, or from input files) as tainted
• Propagate taint during execution
  – Results of operations on tainted data should be tainted
  – Copies of tainted data should be tainted
• Clear taint when tainted data overwritten with untainted data
• How do we get a precompiled program executable to behave this way?
Valgrind: Modifying Executables at Runtime

- Run executable under Valgrind system
- Give Valgrind instructions on how to instrument executable
  - literally, what instructions or function calls to search for, and what instructions to add to them
- Valgrind’s processing loop:
  - Fetch next basic block of program (dictated by IP/PC)
  - Translate code into UCode, Valgrind’s instruction set
  - Add instrumentation code to Valgrind UCode
  - Translate code back to x86; cache for reuse
  - Execute instrumented x86 basic block
  - Repeat...
Adding Instrumentation: Tracking Tainted Data

• **After I/O system calls:**
  – If reading from socket, mark target buffer contents as **tainted**

• **After all memory load instructions:**
  – If source memory tainted, mark register **tainted**
  – If source memory untainted, mark register **untainted**

• **After all memory store instructions:**
  – If source register tainted, mark memory **tainted**
  – If source register untainted, mark memory **untainted**

• **After all arithmetic instructions:**
  – If any operand tainted, mark result **tainted**
  – If no operands tainted, mark result **untainted**
Adding Instrumentation: Detecting Invalid Uses of Tainted Data

• Before all control transfer instructions, add code:
  – If register or memory location holding target function pointer is tainted, raise alarm
  – Means derived from user input; should never happen!

• Needed before each jump, call, ret
Tracking Taint: Shadow Memory

• For every byte of memory, keep shadow memory that tracks taint status
• Simple interface:
  – Is-Tainted(addr) -> \{T \mid F\}
  – Taint(addr, len), Untaint(addr, len)
• Two modes of operation
  – Fast: single bit for each byte of memory
  – Detailed: 4-byte pointer to Taint data structure, containing details of system call, stack, value; written at time of tainting
  – Detailed mode useful for analysis of exploits
• Implementation greatly affects performance
  – Space vs. time tradeoff: packed vs. unpacked
Corner Case: Implicit Flows

• Suppose x tainted, then execute:
  
  ```
  if (x == 0)
    y = 0;
  else
    y = 1;
  ```

• TaintCheck doesn’t taint processor condition flags
  – Would often result in inappropriate propagation of taint; false positives

• But x clearly influences value of y, and y could later influence other values

• Result: false negatives are possible
  – e.g., image compression bit-twiddling code?
Exploit Detection Coverage

- TaintCheck can also instrument function and system calls
- e.g., check printf()-like library calls for tainted format string args
- Built system successfully detects many overwrite exploits (return address, function pointer, format string, GOT entry)
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TaintCheck’s Performance: Monitoring Apache

- Lots of extra instructions...
- Exec time not really right metric; throughput better metric
TaintCheck: Modes of Use (1)

• Identify worm payloads
  – Can be configured to store trace of tainted data flow from all inputs
  – When exploit detected, can walk back to identify input that led to exploit
  – Could pass worm payloads to signature generation system, like Autograph
    • Much more accurate than port-scanner heuristic!

• Prevent exploit of server
  – Halt execution upon exploit detection
TaintCheck: Modes of Use (2)

• Probably too slow for production servers
  – 25X server farm size increase for Amazon?
• Could possibly deploy on a few servers:
  sample traffic
  – Would slow detection of new worm, though; only sampling some inputs
  – Adversary may possibly be able to detect monitored servers by their slow response time; avoid sending them exploit payload