

# Secure Programming Lecture 5: Memory Corruption III (Heap and other attacks)

David Aspinall, Informatics @ Edinburgh

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# Outline

## Infamous attacks II

Recap

Heap overflows

Other memory corruption attacks

Type confusion errors

Summary

# SQL Slammer Worm (2003)

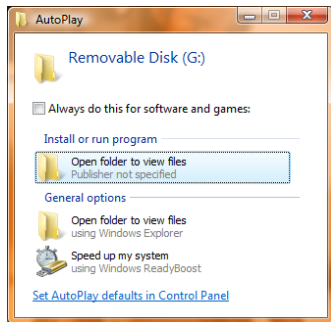
**SECURITY**

Feb 3, 2003 7:00 AM

## Slammer Was Fastest Spreading Worm Yet

- ▶ overflow in MS-SQL server, pure stack overflow
- ▶ 100,000 machines affected. Shutdown ATMs, 911 emergency lines in Seattle.
- ▶ Extreme rapid spread: 8 seconds doubling time
- ▶ Small size: one UDP packet 376 bytes.
- ▶ Removed by reboot; only action was re-transmit.
- ▶ Still fastest ever, 10 years later.

# Conficker (2008)



- ▶ Windows Server; originally used counting error then stack overflow. Newer variants used additional infection mechanisms, e.g. USB autoplay spoof.
- ▶ Around 10 million machines infected.
- ▶ Infected machines join botnet, wait for C&C
- ▶ MS \$250k reward for information still unclaimed

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# Memory corruption

**Buffer overflow** is still one of the most common vulnerabilities being discovered and exploited in commodity software.

We've seen examples of **stack overflow** exploits based on buffer copying without checking bounds.

In this lecture we'll see **heap overflow** exploits, and explain some other causes of memory corruption.

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## Heap overflows: overview

The **heap** is the region of memory that a program uses for dynamically allocated data.

The runtime or operating system provides *memory management* for the heap.

With *explicit* memory management, the programmer uses library functions to allocate and deallocate regions of memory.



# Memory allocation in C

**malloc(size)** tries to allocate a space of size bytes.

- ▶ It returns a pointer to the allocated region
- ▶ ... of type **void\*** which the programmer can cast to the desired pointer type
- ▶ or it **fails** and returns a NULL pointer
- ▶ The memory is **uninitialised** so should be written before being read from

**Question.** Which points above contribute to *unsafe* behaviour in C?

## Memory allocation in C

**calloc(size)** behaves like `malloc(size)` but it also initialises the memory, clearing it to zeroes.

**Question.** Suppose we allocate a string buffer, and immediately assign the empty string to it. What security reason may there be to prefer `'calloc()'` over `'malloc()'`?

# Memory allocation in C

**free(ptr)** frees the previously allocated space at ptr.

- ▶ No return value (void)
- ▶ If it fails (ptr a non-allocated value), what happens?
  - ▶ if ptr is NULL, nothing
  - ▶ “undefined” otherwise,
  - ▶ program may abort, or might carry on and let bad things happen
- ▶ What happens if ptr is dereferenced after being freed?
  - ▶ depends on behaviour of allocator

**Question.** Suppose we accidentally call ‘free(ptr)’ before the final dereference of ‘ptr()’ but before another call to ‘malloc()’. Is that safe?

## Simple heap variable attack

Without memory safety, heap-allocated variables may overflow from one to another.

```
char *user = (char *)malloc(sizeof(char)*8);
char *adminuser = (char *)malloc(sizeof(char)*8);

strcpy(adminuser, "root");

if (argc > 1)
    strcpy(user, argv[1]);
else
    strcpy(user, "guest");

/* Now we'll do ordinary operations as "user" and
   create sensitive system files as "adminuser" */
```

- ▶ Is it possible to overflow user and change adminuser ?

# Simple heap variable attack

**Problem:** how do we know where the allocations will be made?

- ▶ Heap allocator is free to allocate anywhere, not necessarily in adjacent memory

Let's investigate what happens on Linux x86, glibc.

# Simple heap variable attack

```
#include <stdlib.h>
#include <string.h>
#include <stdio.h>

void main(int argc, char *argv[]) {

    char *user = (char *)malloc(sizeof(char)*8);
    char *adminuser = (char *)malloc(sizeof(char)*8);

    strcpy(adminuser, "root");

    if (argc > 1)
        strcpy(user, argv[1]);
    else
        strcpy(user, "guest");

    printf("User is at %p, contains: %s\n", user, user);
    printf("Admin user is at %p, contains: %s\n", adminuser, adminuser);
}
```

```
$ gcc useradminuser.c -o useradminuser.out
$ ./useradminuser.out
User is at 0x9504008, contains: guest
Admin user is at 0x9504018, contains: root

$ ./useradminuser.out
User is at 0x9483008, contains: guest
Admin user is at 0x9483018, contains: root

$ ./useradminuser.out frank
User is at 0x8654008, contains: frank
Admin user is at 0x8654018, contains: root
```

- ▶ Buffers not adjacent, there's some extra space
- ▶ Addresses not identical each run (next lecture...)
- ▶ But admin user *is* stored higher in memory!

Let's try overflowing....

```
$ ./useradminuser.out frank.....david
User is at 0x9405008, contains: frank.....david
Admin user is at 0x9405018, contains: id
```



Let's try overflowing....

```
$ ./useradminuser.out frank.....david
User is at 0x9405008, contains: frank.....david
Admin user is at 0x9405018, contains: id
```

Count more carefully:

```
$ ./useradminuser.out frank56789ABCDEFdavid
User is at 0x9f0b008, contains: frank56789ABCDEFdavid
Admin user is at 0x9f0b018, contains: david
```

Whoa!

Let's try overflowing....

```
$ ./useradminuser.out frank.....david
User is at 0x9405008, contains: frank.....david
Admin user is at 0x9405018, contains: id
```

Count more carefully:

```
$ ./useradminuser.out frank56789ABCDEFdavid
User is at 0x9f0b008, contains: frank56789ABCDEFdavid
Admin user is at 0x9f0b018, contains: david
```

Whoa!

**Question.** Can you think of a way to prevent this attack?

## Remarks about heap variable attack

- ▶ same kind of attack is possible for (mutable) **global variables**, which are allocated statically in another memory segment
- ▶ this is an **application-specific** attack, need to find security-critical path near overflowed variable
- ▶ need to be lucky: overwriting intervening memory might cause crashes later, before the program gets to use the intentionally corrupted data

Is there a more generic attack for the heap?

# Heap allocator implementation

A common heap implementation is to use blocks laid out contiguously in memory, with a *free list* intermingled. Heap blocks have *headers* which give information such as:

- ▶ size of previous block
- ▶ size of this block
- ▶ flags, e.g., *in-use* flag
- ▶ if not in use, pointers to next/previous free block

The doubly-linked free list makes finding spare memory fast for the `malloc()` operation.

# Heap allocator implementation

```
typedef struct mallocblock {
    struct mallocblock *next;
    struct mallocblock *prev;
    int prevsize;
    int thissize;
    int freeflag;
    // malloc space follows the header
} mallocblock_t;
```

- ▶ If freeflag is non-zero, the block is in the freelist
- ▶ Allocator will split blocks and coalesce them again

# General heap overflow attack

Rough idea:

- ▶ Coalescing blocks unlinks them from the free list
- ▶ Attacker makes `unlink()` do an arbitrary write!
  - ▶ uses overflow to set next and previous
  - ▶ and set flags to indicate free
  - ▶ `unlink()` then performs write

# Unlinking operation

```
void unlink(mallocblock_t *element) {
    mallocblock_t *mynext = element->next;
    mallocblock_t *myprev = element->prev;

    mynext->prev = myprev;
    myprev->next = mynext;
}
```

- ▶ performs two (related) word writes
  - ▶ `mynext->prev=*myprev`, `myprev->next=*mynext`
- ▶ attacker arranges at least one of these to be useful

**Exercise.** Check you understand this: draw a picture of a doubly linked list and explain how the attacker can make an arbitrary write.

## Writing to arbitrary locations

What locations might the attacker choose?

- ▶ *Global Offset Table* (GOT) used to link ELF-format binaries. Allows arbitrary locations to be called instead of a library call.
- ▶ *Exit handlers* used in Unix for return from `main()`.
- ▶ Lock pointers or exception handlers stored in the *Windows Process Environment Block* (PEB)
- ▶ Application-level function pointers (e.g. C++ virtual member tables).

The details are intricate, but library exploits and toolkits are available (e.g., Metasploit).



# Heap spraying and browser exploits

Apart from operating system (C code) memory management, other application runtimes provide memory allocation features, which may be accessible to an attacker.

A particular case is in **browser-based exploits** which have made use of heaps for managed runtimes such as **JavaScript, VBScript, Flash, HTML5**.

Writing shell code to predictable heap locations is sometimes called **heap spraying**. This is simple in concept: string variables manipulated in scripts are allocated in a heap.

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# Out-by-one errors

- ▶ Mistaking the size of array

```
for (i=0; i<=sizeof(dest); i++)  
    dest[i]=src[i];
```

- ▶ Forgetting to account for string terminator in C

```
if (strlen(user) > sizeof(buf))  
    die("user string too long\n");  
strcpy(buf, user);
```

Typical programming errors, may cause exploitable memory corruption (overflow by one position), depending on the application.

# Integer overflow

Integer overflow (wrap-around) can cause memory corruption errors.

Typical case: bounds are calculated based on user inputs.

```
char *make_table(int width, int height, char* defaultrow) {
    char *buf;
    int n = width * height;
    buf = (char*)malloc(n);
    if (!buf)
        return NULL;
    for (i=i; i<height; i++)
        memcpy(&buf[i*width], defaultrow, width);
}
```

**Exercise.** Show that with carefully chosen width and height, it's possible to perform a massive overflow.

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# Typing discipline

## Type safety

A programming language, analysis tool or runtime is said to enforce **type safety** if it has a clearly specified typing discipline for data values and it ensures that data values (representations) for types stay within the domain of those types during program execution.

# C is not type safe!

C has overly flexible typing:

- ▶ **implicit type conversions**, inserted automatically by the compiler, often for convenience of arithmetic combining differently sized primitives.
- ▶ **explicit type casts**, where the programmer writes `foo = (sometype) bar;`  
A value in one type is treated as a value of another type. For pointers, there is no effect: the pointed-to values are not altered.

Numeric conversions may perform *sign extension* or *truncation*.

Some conversions are implementation defined (i.e., are not pinned down by the language, so vary depending on the compiler, platform, etc).

# Signed integer comparison vulnerability

```
int read_user_data(int sockfd) {
    int length;
    char buffer[1024];
    length = get_user_length(sockfd);

    if (length>1024) {
        error("Input size too large\n");
        return -1;
    }
    if (recv(sockfd, buffer, length)<0) {
        error("Read format error\n");
        return -1;
    }
    return 0; // success
}
```

- ▶ Here, a negative length defeats the size check...
- ▶ but `recv` accepts a `size_t` type, which is *unsigned*
- ▶ a negative value becomes a large positive one
- ▶ ...and `recv()` overflows buffer.



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# Memory corruption attacks

We've seen memory corruption attacks *on the heap, on the stack* and elsewhere.

Overflow vulnerabilities in code are caused at least by:

- ▶ unchecked buffer boundaries
- ▶ out-by-one errors
- ▶ integer overflow
- ▶ type confusion errors

# Review questions

## **Heap overflows**

- ▶ Explain the API functions used to interface to heap allocation in C. Give two examples of risky behaviour.
- ▶ Show how overflowing one heap-allocated variable can corrupt a second.
- ▶ Sketch how a heap overflow attack can exploit memory allocation routines to write to locations controlled by an attacker.

## **Other vulnerabilities**

- ▶ Explain type confusion errors, giving an example.

## Coming next

Next time, we'll look at **countermeasures** to overflows, including **protection mechanisms** and **secure programming**.

## References and credits

- ▶ The Conficker autoplay image is from The Register.
- ▶ See Sophos article about Slammer, 10 years on.
- ▶ Heap overflows were first described by Solar Designer. A longer article is in *Phrack 57*.
- ▶ Some of the examples were adapted from *The Art of Software Security Assessment*.