

**ANALYZING THE STACK-BASED BUFFER OVERFLOW
PROBLEM**

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**ANALYZING THE STACK-BASED BUFFER OVERFLOW
PROBLEM**

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Division of Applied Sciences, College of Arts and Sciences
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**By
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ABSTRAK (BAHASA MELAYU)

Walaupun banyak penyelidikan telah dijalankan selama hampir lebih dari 20 tahun, masalah *buffer overflow* masih lagi berlaku hingga sekarang. Kajian ini mengambil peluang untuk menganalisa *buffer overflow* jenis *stack-based* yang merupakan satu jenis *buffer overflow* yang dominan. Satu demonstrasi eksperimen dalam persekitaran terkawal dijalankan untuk menunjukkan bagaimana dan kenapa masalah ini berlaku. Sepanjang demonstrasi ini, syarat-syarat utama kenapa dan bagaimana eksploitasi ini berlaku dikenalpasti, dianalisa dan didokumenkan. Hasil kajian ringkas ini menunjukkan bahawa terdapat banyak lagi yang boleh dilakukan terutamanya pada peringkat penulisan kod untuk mengelakkan masalah *buffer overflow* ini sebelum kerosakan berlaku, yang selalunya selepas produk perisian telah dijual. Dalam hal ini ianya sudah tentu membazir banyak sumber seperti kos, tenaga manusia dan masa. Hasilnya, beberapa cadangan yang praktikal telah kemukakan di mana ianya sesuai untuk pelaksanaan dan penyelidikan seterusnya. Selain dari itu, hasil kajian ini juga penting untuk dijadikan asas dalam merekabentuk dan melaksana kaedah atau mekanisma baru untuk mengesan dan mengelak masalah *buffer overflow*.

ABSTRACT

It is interesting to know that a buffer overflow problem still exist today despite of many researches have been conducted in a period of more than 20 years. This study takes an opportunity to analyze one of the dominant buffer overflow problem type, a stack-based buffer overflow. A controlled experimental demonstration has been carried out to emulate a stack-based buffer overflow exploit. During the process, main conditions why and how the exploit happens will be identified, analyzed and documented. The findings showed that more works can be done at the coding stage to prevent the problem before the damage (exploit) occurs which normally happen after the software product has been distributed. In this case more resources have been wasted such as cost, man-hour and time. Hence, several practical suggestions with its own advantageous have been highlighted for further research and implementation. In addition, the findings should be very useful inputs in designing and implementing new buffer overflow detection and prevention mechanisms.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE	i
ABSTRAK (BAHASA MELAYU)	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	ix
LIST OF APPENDICES	x
LIST OF CODE LISTING	xi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Problem Statement	2
1.2 Research Objective	2
1.3 Scope and Limitation	2
1.4 Significance of the Study	3
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 The Current Trends	4
2.2 Detection and Prevention Solutions	7
2.3 The Current Implementation	7
2.4 The Exploit Advancement	8
2.5 Intel Processor Execution Environment	9
2.5.1 Memory	9
2.5.2 Registers	10
2.5.3 Procedure Call	12
2.5.3.1 Stack	12
2.5.3.2 General Task of the Stack Set up	14
2.5.3.3 Procedure Linking Information	14
2.5.3.4 Calling Procedures Using CALL and RET	15
2.6 Related Instructions and Stack Manipulation	17
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	21
3.1 Introduction	21
3.2 The Specifications	22
3.3 Vulnerable Environment Preparation	22
3.3.1 Disabling the SELinux	23
3.3.2 Non-Executable Stack and Address Space Randomization	24
3.4 Preparing the Vulnerable Code	25
3.5 C Function Call Convention	29
3.6 Stack Boundary Alignment	33
3.7 Generating and Testing Shellcode as Payload	34

3.8 Storing Shellcode in Environment Variable	38
3.9 The Exploit: The Miserable setuid Program	43
3.10 Optional Steps	45
3.10.1 Disabling the Canary	45
3.10.2 Flagging the Executable Bit	46
3.10.3 The bash Shell Protection	47
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	48
4.1 The Conditions for Buffer Overflow to Occur	48
4.1.1 Using Unsafe C Function	48
4.1.2 No Input Validation	49
4.1.3 Return Address Adjacent to Code and Data	50
4.1.4 Suitable Exploit Code Availability	50
4.2 Current Implementation Review	51
4.3 The Coding Stage Advantage	52
4.4 Recommendations	53
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK	56
5.1 Research Contribution	56
5.2 Related Future Work	57
REFERENCES	58

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Shifts in threats and vulnerabilities reported	5
Table 2.2: Summary of the vulnerability type distribution for 2001 – 2006	6
Table 2.3: The 32-bit general-purpose registers	11
Table 3.1: C function call convention	31
Table 3.2: Activation record data description	32

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1:	Top 20 threats and vulnerabilities, January - October 2007	5
Figure 2.2:	A structure of stack	13
Figure 2.3:	The PUSH operation	18
Figure 2.4:	The PUSHA operation	18
Figure 2.5:	The POP operation	19
Figure 2.6:	The POPA operation	19
Figure 3.1:	Disabling the SELinux permanently by editing /etc/sysconfig/selinux file	23
Figure 3.2:	Disabling exec-shield for address space randomization by editing the sysctl.conf file	25
Figure 3.3:	A typical stack frame layout for C function call	28
Figure 3.4:	Overwriting the return address and pointing to other location	29
Figure 3.5:	A general type of data that might appear in an activation record	31
Figure 3.6:	Screenshot for the shellcode testing	37
Figure 3.7:	Screenshot for the running payload and finding the address program	40
Figure 3.8:	The payload has been setup in the environment variable	41
Figure 3.9:	The bit and byte order for little-endian machine	42
Figure 3.10:	The completed exploit 44	44
Figure 3.11:	Stack based buffer overflow - escalating to root	45
Figure 4.1:	Buffer overflow detection and prevention at various stages of program execution	51
Figure 4.2:	Buffer overflow issue during the coding, compiling and running a program	52
Figure 4.3:	Buffer overflow detection and prevention enhancement at the coding level	54

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMD	Advance Micro Device
ASLR	Address Space Layout Randomization
CERT	Computer Emergency Response Team
CPU	Central Processing Unit
CVE	Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures
DEP	Data Execution Prevention
DLL	Dynamic Link Library
EBP/ebp	extended base pointer
EIP/eip	extended instruction pointer
ESP/esp	extended stack pointer
GCC	GNU Compiler Collection
gdb	GNU Debugger
GOT	Global Offset Table
IDE	Integrated Development Environment
IDS	Intrusion Detection System
IEC	International Electrotechnical Commission
IOS	Internetwork Operating System
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
NOEXEC	No Execute
NOP	No Operation
NX	No Execute
OS	Operating System
POC	Proof-Of-Concept
SEH	Structured Exception Handling
SP	Service Pack
SQL	Structured Query Language
SSP	Stack-Smashing Protector
XD	Execute Disable

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: The three memory management models	65
APPENDIX B: The general system and application programming registers	66
APPENDIX C: The alternate general-purpose register names	67
APPENDIX D: The use of segment registers for flat memory model	68
APPENDIX E: The use of segment registers in segmented memory model	69
APPENDIX F: The default segment selection rules	70

LIST OF CODE LISTING

CODE LISTING 3.1:	Running the vulnerable code with several input 1234 samples	71
CODE LISTING 3.2:	Generating the core dump file	72
CODE LISTING 3.3:	Viewing the core dump file content	
CODE LISTING 3.4:	Running the vulnerable code with overflow input and viewing the core dump file	73
CODE LISTING 3.5:	Debugging the vulnerable code and finding the allocated buffer size	77
CODE LISTING 3.6:	Lowering the stack boundary alignment	79
CODE LISTING 3.7:	A shellcode in assembly that acts as a payload	80
CODE LISTING 3.8:	Generating the binary hex representation using objdump tool	82
CODE LISTING 3.9:	Viewing the environment variable after storing the shellcode	84
CODE LISTING 3.10:	A stack-based buffer overflow vulnerability and exploit in action	86

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Almost 20 years after the first publicized buffer overflow vulnerability and exploit used by Morris worm in November, 1988 [1] then followed by Code Red worm in July 2001 [2] and Slammer worm [3] in January 2003, the buffer overflow still one of the top vulnerability, proven to have a severe effect, which has been exploited successfully. Since then, the buffer overflow vulnerable exploited again and again which cover a wide range of computer application, library, operating system (kernel and embedded system as well) and networking. There are many hardware and software based techniques and tools that have been proposed and developed to detect and protect from buffer overflow vulnerable. However this vulnerable still happen and based on the trend it look likes this problem will continue to happen.

It is publicly known that the buffer overflow happens when there is no bound checking on the used buffer in programs. In the plain source codes, this no bound checking is a normal for unsafe programming language that dominated by C and C++ for a set of the standard library functions. Unfortunately, C and C++ are the languages that most widely used for critical applications such as kernel, Operating System (OS), database engine and device driver.

A buffer is small and reusable temporary data storage during the program execution. Normally it is declared as sized array data type in C and C++ programs though it is not limited to the declared sized array because other unsafe standard C and C++ functions used for string and character manipulation such as `strcat()` and `gets()` also resembled similar characteristics. Without bound checking, input size that bigger than the declared size of the array will overwrite other adjacent data in memory and corrupting them. From the programmer point of view, the problem is, when we declared a sized array in a program, we normally already expected or pre-calculated the maximum number of input. However, we cannot accurately determine the maximum number of input from user and other application

The contents of
the thesis is for
internal user
only

Hopefully, by having a better understanding on how and why the stack-based buffer overflow vulnerability and exploit, programmer that using C or other similar 'unsafe language' can avoid this problem at the earliest stage of their task in developing a program. Having a good knowledge where the buffer overflow vulnerability is possible to happen in the application development for example, will obviously contribute something that can improve the product's quality, saving cost, man-hour and time. This is also supposed to be beneficial for other languages that use C as their base code so that the buffer overflow problem does not inherited and propagated.

5.2 Related Future Work

The information provided in this part is actually extracted from the Finding and Discussion section. One future research that can be done is to find the relationship between the program size and speed when we add extra code for buffer overflow protection. This should be specific to buffer overflow codes and should be critical for large program. The effectiveness of the prior secure coding knowledge or training also could be measured when the topics of secure C/C++ coding included in C/C++ syllabus or suitable secure coding training is conducted. This also can be applied when implementing a comprehensive exception handling in C/C++ programming.

Another interesting thing to explore is to enhance the C/C++ editor or compiler with educational info of the buffer overflow problem such as through the intellisense feature. Research can be done to gauge the effectiveness of the implementation on reducing the buffer overflow problem.

This project does not emphasize on the compile and runtime detection and prevention solution other than implementing a comprehensive exception handling because of the many researches (mostly funded) have been carried out as discussed in the Literature Review section. Although it is out of programmer's control, this does not mean it is not important. For example, the convention used for C function call, the way how the stack frame constructed and destroyed (also how the processor support the mechanism through its execution environment) may be reviewed and changed to the better and safer ways.

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