Machine-Level Programming V: Advanced Topics

Introduction to Computer Systems 8th Lecture, Oct. 09, 2025

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Today

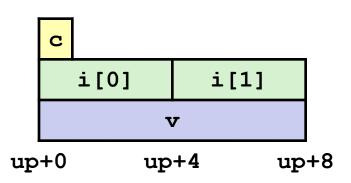
- Unions
- Memory Layout
- Buffer Overflow
 - Vulnerability
 - Protection

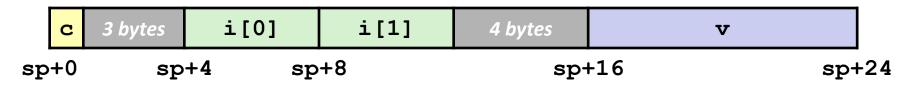
Union Allocation

- Allocate according to largest element
- Can only use one field at a time

```
union U1 {
  char c;
  int i[2];
  double v;
} *up;
```

```
struct S1 {
  char c;
  int i[2];
  double v;
} *sp;
```





Using Union to Access Bit Patterns

```
typedef union {
   float f;
   unsigned u;
} bit_float_t;
```

```
u
f
) 4
```

```
float bit2float(unsigned u)
{
  bit_float_t arg;
  arg.u = u;
  return arg.f;
}
```

```
unsigned float2bit(float f)
{
  bit_float_t arg;
  arg.f = f;
  return arg.u;
}
```

Same as (float) u?

Same as (unsigned) f?

Byte Ordering Revisited

■ Idea

- Short/long/quad words stored in memory as 2/4/8 consecutive bytes
- Which byte is most (least) significant?
- Can cause problems when exchanging binary data between machines

■ Big Endian

- Most significant byte has lowest address
- Sparc, Internet

■ Little Endian

- Least significant byte has lowest address
- Intel x86, ARM Android and IOS

Bi Endian

- Can be configured either way
- ARM

Byte Ordering Example

```
union {
  unsigned char c[8];
  unsigned short s[4];
  unsigned int i[2];
  unsigned long l[1];
} dw;
```

32-bit

c[0]	c[1]	c[2]	c[3]	c[4]	c[5]	c[6]	c[7]
s[0]		s[1]		s[2]		s[3]	
	i[0]			i[1]	
	1[0]					

64-bit

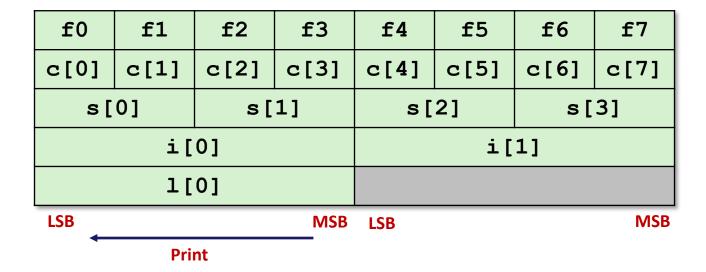
c[0]	c[1]	c[2]	c[3]	c[4]	c[5]	c[6]	c[7]	
s[0]		s[1]		s[2]		s[3]		
	i[0]		i[1]				
1[0]								

Byte Ordering Example (Cont).

```
int j;
for (j = 0; j < 8; j++)
    dw.c[i] = 0xf0 + i;
printf("Characters 0-7 ==
[0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x]n",
    dw.c[0], dw.c[1], dw.c[2], dw.c[3],
    dw.c[4], dw.c[5], dw.c[6], dw.c[7]);
printf("Shorts 0-3 == [0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x, 0x8x] \n",
    dw.s[0], dw.s[1], dw.s[2], dw.s[3]);
printf("Ints 0-1 == [0x%x, 0x%x] \n",
    dw.i[0], dw.i[1]);
printf("Long 0 == [0x%1x]\n",
    dw.1[0]);
```

Byte Ordering on IA32

Little Endian



Output:

```
Characters 0-7 == [0xf0,0xf1,0xf2,0xf3,0xf4,0xf5,0xf6,0xf7]
Shorts 0-3 == [0xf1f0,0xf3f2,0xf5f4,0xf7f6]
Ints 0-1 == [0xf3f2f1f0,0xf7f6f5f4]
Long 0 == [0xf3f2f1f0]
```

Byte Ordering on Sun

Big Endian

f0	f1	f2	f3	f4	f5	f6	£7
c[0]	c[1]	c[2]	c[3]	c[4]	c[5]	c[6]	c[7]
s[0] s[1]			1]	s[2]		s[3]	
	i[0]			i[1]	
	1[0]					

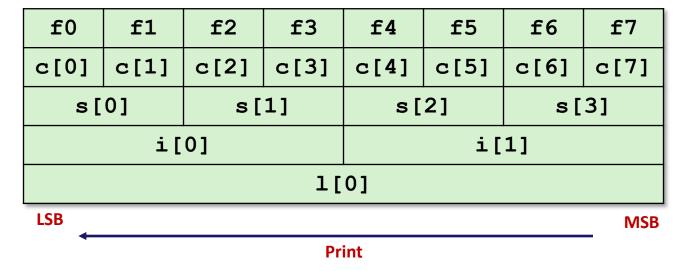
MSB LSB MSB LSB Print

Output on Sun:

```
Characters 0-7 == [0xf0,0xf1,0xf2,0xf3,0xf4,0xf5,0xf6,0xf7]
Shorts 0-3 == [0xf0f1,0xf2f3,0xf4f5,0xf6f7]
Ints 0-1 == [0xf0f1f2f3,0xf4f5f6f7]
Long 0 == [0xf0f1f2f3]
```

Byte Ordering on x86-64

Little Endian



Output on x86-64:

```
Characters 0-7 == [0xf0,0xf1,0xf2,0xf3,0xf4,0xf5,0xf6,0xf7]

Shorts 0-3 == [0xf1f0,0xf3f2,0xf5f4,0xf7f6]

Ints 0-1 == [0xf3f2f1f0,0xf7f6f5f4]

Long 0 == [0xf7f6f5f4f3f2f1f0]
```

Summary of Compound Types in C

Arrays

- Contiguous allocation of memory
- Aligned to satisfy every element's alignment requirement
- Pointer to first element
- No bounds checking

Structures

- Allocate bytes in order declared
- Pad in middle and at end to satisfy alignment

Unions

- Overlay declarations
- Way to circumvent type system

Today

- Unions
- Memory Layout
- Buffer Overflow
 - Vulnerability
 - Protection

Stack

not drawn to scale

randomized

randomized

Shared

■ %rsp

x86-64 Linux Memory Layout

Stack

- Runtime stack (8MB limit)
- e.g., local variables

Heap

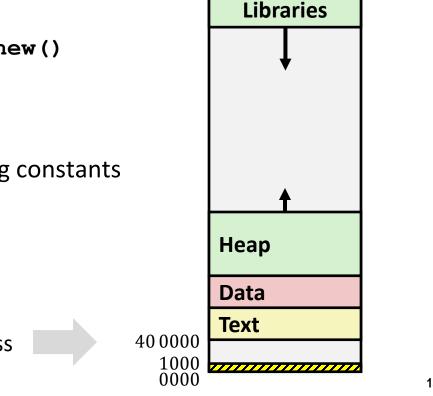
- Dynamically allocated as needed
- When call malloc(), calloc(), new()

Data

- Statically allocated data
- e.g., global vars, static vars, string constants

Text / Shared Libraries

- **Executable machine instructions**
- Read-only



8MB-

0000 7FFF F800 0000

Hex Address

 $(2^{47} - 4096 =) 00007FFFFFFFF000$

128

MB

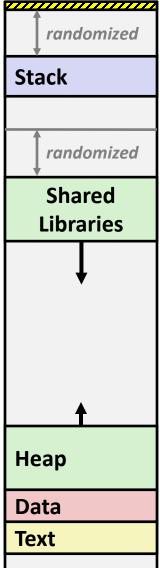
not drawn to scale

Memory Allocation Example

0000 7FFF FFFF F000

40 0000

```
char big array[1L<<24]; /* 16 MB */
char huge array[1L<<31]; /* 2 GB */
int global = 0;
int useless() { return 0; }
int main ()
    void *phuge1, *psmall2, *phuge3, *psmall4;
    int local = 0;
   phuge1 = malloc(1L << 28); /* 256 MB */</pre>
   psmall2 = malloc(1L << 8); /* 256 B */
   phuge3 = malloc(1L << 32); /* 4 GB */</pre>
   psmall4 = malloc(1L << 8); /* 256 B */
 /* Some print statements ... */
```



Where does everything go?

Stack

not drawn to scale

randomized

x86-64 Example Addresses

address range ~2⁴⁷

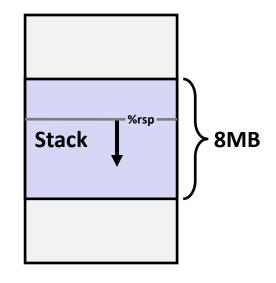
local
phuge1
phuge3
psmall4
psmall2
big_array
huge_array
main()
useless()

randomized Shared 0×00007 ffe4d3be87c Libraries 0x00007f7262a1e010 and Huge 0x00007f7162a1d010 **Malloc Blocks** 0x000000008359d120 0x000000008359d010 $0 \times 00000000080601060$ $0 \times 00000000000601060$ 0x00000000040060c $0 \times 0000000000400590$ Heap (Exact values can vary) Data **Text** 40 0000

0000 7FFF FFFF F000

not drawn to scale

Runaway Stack Example



- Functions store local data in stack frame
- Recursive functions cause deep nesting of frames
- What happens when we run out of space?

```
./runaway 67
x = 67. a at 0x7ffd18aba930
x = 66. a at 0x7ffd18a9a920
x = 65. a at 0x7ffd18a7a910
x = 64. a at 0x7ffd18a5a900
. . .
x = 4. a at 0x7ffd182da540
x = 3. a at 0x7ffd182ba530
x = 2. a at 0x7ffd1829a520
Segmentation fault (core dumped)
```

Today

- Unions
- Memory Layout
- Buffer Overflow
 - Vulnerability
 - Protection

Recall: Memory Referencing Bug Example

```
typedef struct {
  int a[2];
  double d;
} struct_t;

double fun(int i) {
  volatile struct_t s;
  s.d = 3.14;
  s.a[i] = 1073741824; /* Possibly out of bounds */
  return s.d;
}
```

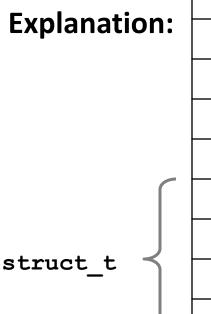
```
fun (0) -> 3.1400000000
fun (1) -> 3.1400000000
fun (2) -> 3.1399998665
fun (3) -> 2.0000006104
fun (6) -> Stack smashing detected
fun (8) -> Segmentation fault
```

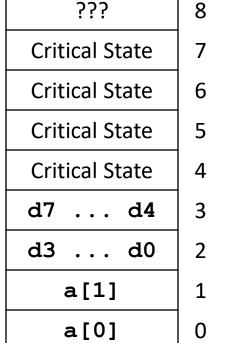
Result is system specific

Memory Referencing Bug Example

```
typedef struct {
  int a[2];
  double d;
} struct_t;
```

```
fun(0)
            3.1400000000
       ->
            3.1400000000
fun (1)
       ->
fun(2)
      -> 3.1399998665
fun(3)
      -> 2.0000006104
fun(4)
       ->
            Segmentation fault
fun(8)
            3.1400000000
       ->
```





Location accessed by fun(i)

Such problems are a BIG deal

- Generally called a "buffer overflow"
 - when exceeding the memory size allocated for an array
- Why a big deal?
 - It's the #1 technical cause of security vulnerabilities
 - #1 overall cause is social engineering / user ignorance

Most common form

- Unchecked lengths on string inputs
- Particularly for bounded character arrays on the stack
 - sometimes referred to as stack smashing

String Library Code

■ Implementation of Unix function gets ()

```
/* Get string from stdin */
char *gets(char *dest)
{
   int c = getchar();
   char *p = dest;
   while (c != EOF && c != '\n') {
        *p++ = c;
        c = getchar();
   }
   *p = '\0';
   return dest;
}
```

- No way to specify limit on number of characters to read
- Similar problems with other library functions
 - strcpy, strcat: Copy strings of arbitrary length
 - scanf, fscanf, sscanf, when given %s conversion specification

Vulnerable Buffer Code

```
/* Echo Line */
void echo()
{
    char buf[4]; /* Way too small! */
    gets(buf);
    puts(buf);
}
```

←btw, how big is big enough?

```
void call_echo() {
    echo();
}
```

```
unix>./bufdemo-nsp
Type a string:01234567890123456789012
01234567890123456789012
```

```
unix>./bufdemo-nsp
Type a string:012345678901234567890123
012345678901234567890123
Segmentation Fault
```

Buffer Overflow Disassembly

echo:

```
00000000004006cf <echo>:
 4006cf: 48 83 ec 18
                                       $0x18,%rsp
                                sub
 4006d3: 48 89 e7
                                       %rsp,%rdi
                                mov
 4006d6: e8 a5 ff ff ff
                                       400680 <gets>
                                callq
 4006db: 48 89 e7
                                       %rsp,%rdi
                                mov
 4006de: e8 3d fe ff ff
                                       400520 <puts@plt>
                                callq
                                       $0x18,%rsp
 4006e3: 48 83 c4 18
                                add
 4006e7: c3
                                retq
```

call_echo:

4006e8:	48	83	ec	08		sub	\$0x8,%rsp
4006ec:	b8	00	00	00	00	mov	\$0x0,%eax
4006f1:	e 8	d9	ff	ff	ff	callq	4006cf <echo></echo>
4006f6:	48	83	c4	80		add	\$0x8,%rsp
4006fa:	с3					retq	

Buffer Overflow Stack

Before call to gets

Stack Frame for call echo

Return Address (8 bytes)

20 bytes unused

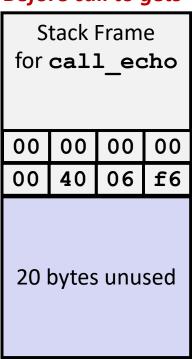
```
[3][2][1][0] buf 		%rsp
```

```
/* Echo Line */
void echo()
    char buf[4]; /* Way too small! */
    gets(buf);
    puts(buf);
```

```
echo:
  subq $24, %rsp
 movq %rsp, %rdi
 call gets
```

Buffer Overflow Stack Example

Before call to gets



```
void echo()
{
    char buf[4];
    gets(buf);
}
echo:
subq $24, %rsp
movq %rsp, %rdi
call gets
...
}
```

call_echo:

```
...
4006f1: callq 4006cf <echo>
4006f6: add $0x8,%rsp
...
```

[3][2][1][0] buf %rsp

Buffer Overflow Stack Example #1

After call to gets

Stack Frame for call_echo									
00	00	00	00						
00	40	06	f6						
00	32	31	30						
39	38	37	36						
35 34 33 32									
31	30	39	38						
37	36	35	34						
33	33 32 31 30								

```
void echo()
{
    char buf[4];
    gets(buf);
    . . .
}
echo:
subq $24, %rsp
movq %rsp, %rdi
call gets
. . . .
```

call_echo:

```
....
4006f1: callq 4006cf <echo>
4006f6: add $0x8,%rsp
....
```

buf ← %rsp

```
unix>./bufdemo-nsp
Type a string:01234567890123456789012
01234567890123456789012
```

"01234567890123456789012\0"

Overflowed buffer, but did not corrupt state

Buffer Overflow Stack Example #2

After call to gets

Stack Frame for call_echo									
00	00	00	00						
00	40	06	00						
33	32	31	30						
39	38	37	36						
35	35 34 33 32								
31	30	39	38						
37	36	35	34						
33	33 32 31 30								

```
void echo()
{
    subq $24, %rsp
    char buf[4];
    gets(buf);
    call gets
}
```

call_echo:

```
. . . . 4006f1: callq 4006cf <echo> 4006f6: add $0x8,%rsp
```

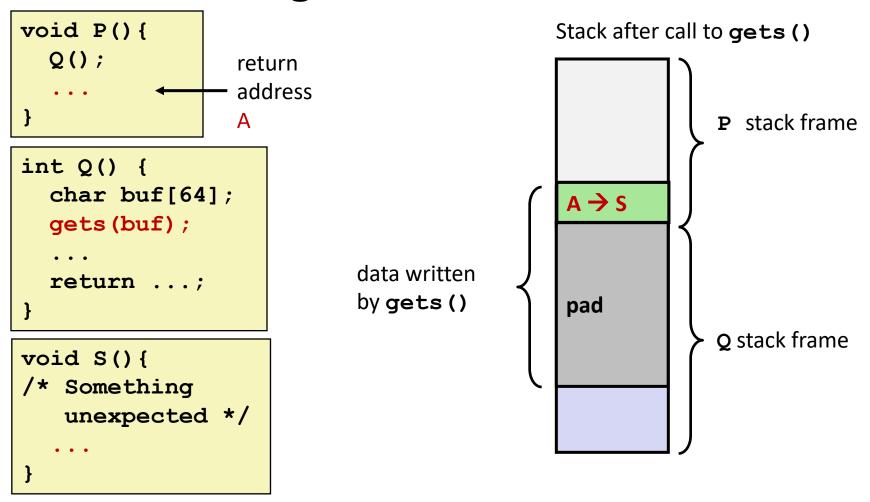
buf ← %rsp

```
unix>./bufdemo-nsp

Type a string:012345678901234567890123
012345678901234567890123
Segmentation fault
```

Program "returned" to 0x0400600, and then crashed.

Stack Smashing Attacks



- Overwrite normal return address A with address of some other code S
- When Q executes ret, will jump to other code

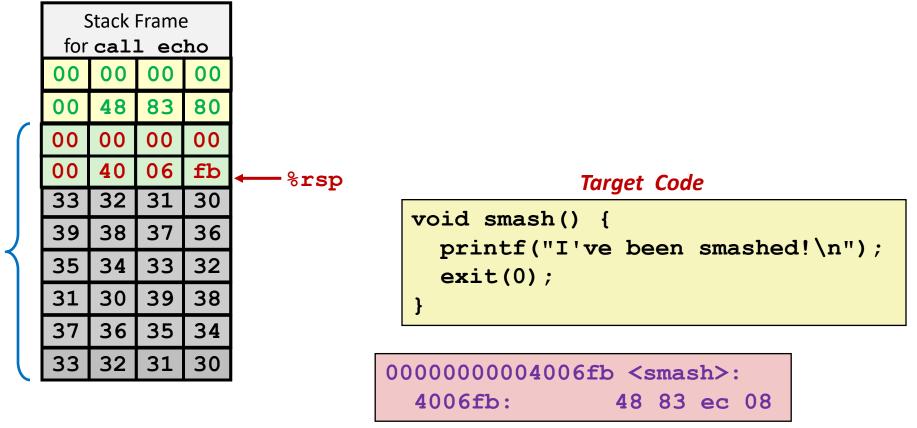
Crafting Smashing String

```
int echo() {
  Stack Frame
                   char buf[4];
 for call echo
                   gets(buf);
   00
       00
           00
00
00
   48
       83
           80
                   return ...;
00
   00
       00
           00
00
       06
           fb
   40
                 -%rsp
                                         Target Code
                            void smash() {
                              printf("I've been smashed!\n");
                              exit(0);
                24 bytes
                          00000000004006fb <smash>:
                            4006fb: 48 83 ec 08
```

Attack String (Hex)

```
30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 fb 06 40 00 00 00 00
```

Smashing String Effect



Attack String (Hex)

30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 fb 06 40 00 00 00 00

Performing Stack Smash

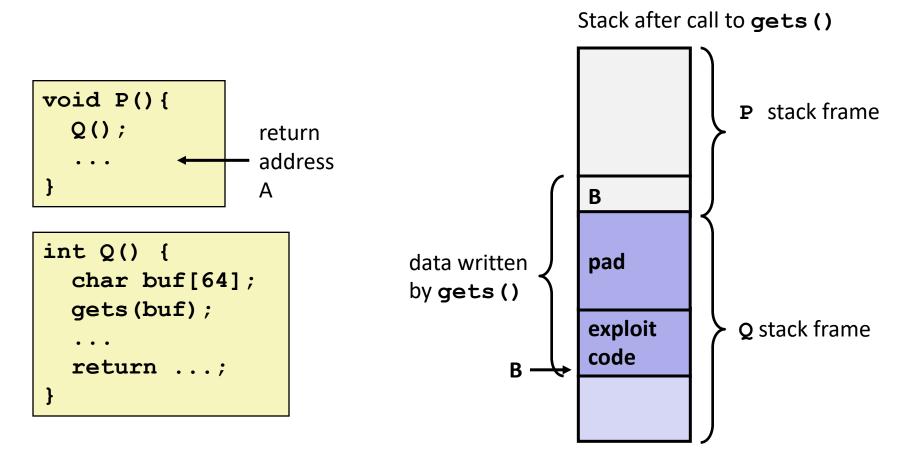
```
linux> cat smash-hex.txt
30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 c8 06 40 00 00 00 00 00
linux> cat smash-hex.txt | ./hexify | ./bufdemo-nsp
Type a string:012345678901234567890123?@
I've been smashed!
```

- Put hex sequence in file smash-hex.txt
- Use hexify program to convert hex digits to characters
 - Some of them are non-printing
- Provide as input to vulnerable program

```
void smash() {
  printf("I've been smashed!\n");
  exit(0);
}
```

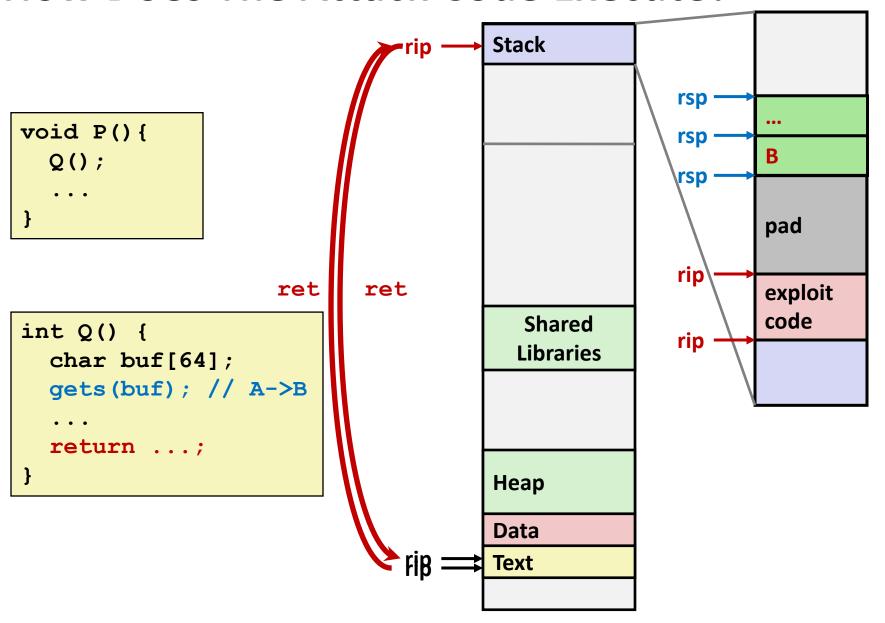
```
30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 c8 06 40 00 00 00 00 00
```

Code Injection Attacks



- Input string contains byte representation of executable code
- Overwrite return address A with address of buffer B
- When Q executes ret, will jump to exploit code

How Does The Attack Code Execute?



Exploits Based on Buffer Overflows

- Buffer overflow bugs can allow remote machines to execute arbitrary code on victim machines
- Distressingly common in real progams
 - Programmers keep making the same mistakes < </p>
 - Recent measures make these attacks much more difficult
- Examples across the decades
 - Original "Internet worm" (1988)
 - "IM wars" (1999)
 - Twilight hack on Wii (2000s)
 - ... and many, many more
- You will learn some of the tricks in attacklab
 - Hopefully to convince you to never leave such holes in your programs!!

Example: the original Internet worm (1988)

Exploited a few vulnerabilities to spread

- Early versions of the finger server (fingerd) used gets () to read the argument sent by the client:
 - finger droh@cs.cmu.edu
- Worm attacked fingerd server by sending phony argument:
 - finger "exploit-code padding new-returnaddress"
 - exploit code: executed a root shell on the victim machine with a direct TCP connection to the attacker.

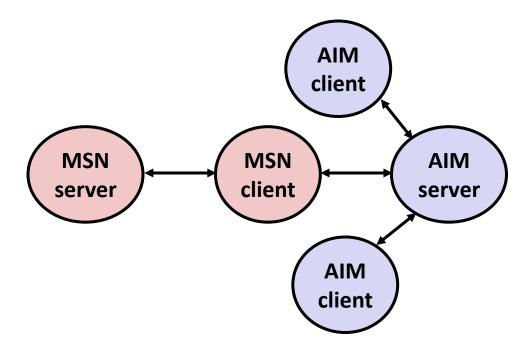
Once on a machine, scanned for other machines to attack

- lacktriangle invaded \sim 6000 computers in hours (10% of the Internet \odot)
 - see June 1989 article in Comm. of the ACM
- the young author of the worm was prosecuted...
- and CERT was formed... still homed at CMU

Example 2: IM War

July, 1999

- Microsoft launches MSN Messenger (instant messaging system).
- Messenger clients can access popular AOL Instant Messaging Service (AIM) servers



IM War (cont.)

August 1999

- Mysteriously, Messenger clients can no longer access AIM servers
- Microsoft and AOL begin the IM war:
 - AOL changes server to disallow Messenger clients
 - Microsoft makes changes to clients to defeat AOL changes
 - At least 13 such skirmishes
- What was really happening?
 - AOL had discovered a buffer overflow bug in their own AIM clients
 - They exploited it to detect and block Microsoft: the exploit code returned a 4-byte signature (the bytes at some location in the AIM client) to server
 - When Microsoft changed code to match signature, AOL changed signature location

Date: Wed, 11 Aug 1999 11:30:57 -0700 (PDT) From: Phil Bucking <philbucking@yahoo.com>

Subject: AOL exploiting buffer overrun bug in their own software!

To: rms@pharlap.com

Mr. Smith,

I am writing you because I have discovered something that I think you might find interesting because you are an Internet security expert with experience in this area. I have also tried to contact AOL but received no response.

I am a developer who has been working on a revolutionary new instant messaging client that should be released later this year.

. . .

It appears that the AIM client has a buffer overrun bug. By itself this might not be the end of the world, as MS surely has had its share. But AOL is now *exploiting their own buffer overrun bug* to help in its efforts to block MS Instant Messenger.

. . . .

Since you have significant credibility with the press I hope that you can use this information to help inform people that behind AOL's friendly exterior they are nefariously compromising peoples' security.

Sincerely,
Phil Bucking
Founder, Bucking Consulting
philbucking@yahoo.com

It was later determined that this email originated from within Microsoft!

Aside: Worms and Viruses

- Worm: A program that
 - Can run by itself
 - Can propagate a fully working version of itself to other computers
- Virus: Code that
 - Adds itself to other programs
 - Does not run independently
- Both are (usually) designed to spread among computers and to wreak havoc

what to do about buffer overflow attacks

- Avoid overflow vulnerabilities
- Employ system-level protections
- Have compiler use "stack canaries"

Lets talk about each...

1. Avoid Overflow Vulnerabilities in Code (!)

```
/* Echo Line */
void echo()
{
   char buf[4]; /* Way too small! */
   fgets(buf, 4, stdin);
   puts(buf);
}
```

- For example, use library routines that limit string lengths
 - fgets instead of gets
 - strncpy instead of strcpy
 - Don't use scanf with %s conversion specification
 - Use fgets to read the string
 - Or use %ns where n is a suitable integer

2. System-Level Protections can help

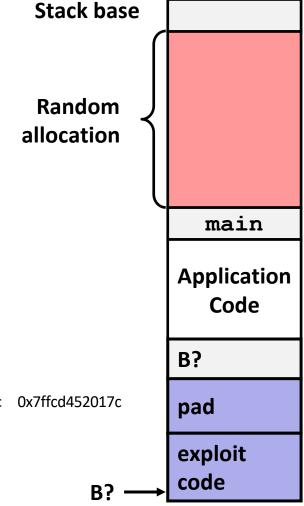
Randomized stack offsets

- At start of program, allocate random amount of space on stack
- Shifts stack addresses for entire program
- Makes it difficult for hacker to predict beginning of inserted code
- E.g.: 5 executions of memory allocation code

local 0x7ffe4d3be87c 0x7fff75a4f9fc 0x7ffeadb7c80c

0x7ffeaea2fdac 0x7ffcd452017c

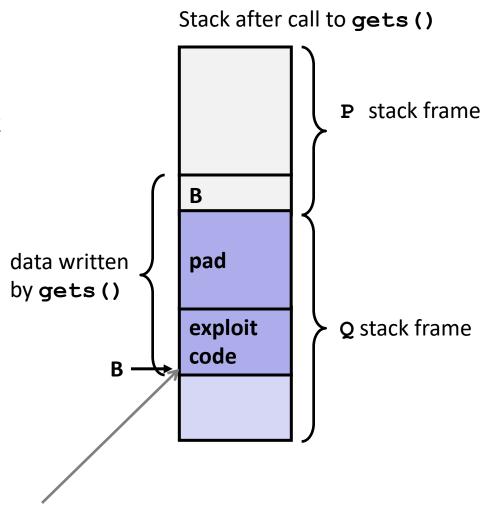
 Stack repositioned each time program executes



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2. System-Level Protections can help

- Nonexecutable code segments
 - In traditional x86, can mark region of memory as either "read-only" or "writeable"
 - Can execute anything readable
 - X86-64 added explicit "execute" permission
 - Stack marked as nonexecutable



Any attempt to execute this code will fail

3. Stack Canaries can help

Idea

- Place special value ("canary") on stack just beyond buffer
- Check for corruption before exiting function

GCC Implementation

- -fstack-protector
- Now the default (disabled earlier)

```
unix>./bufdemo-sp
Type a string:0123456
0123456
```

```
unix>./bufdemo-sp
Type a string:01234567
*** stack smashing detected ***
```

Protected Buffer Disassembly

\$0x18,%rsp

echo:

```
40072f:
         sub
                 $0x18,%rsp
400733:
                 %fs:0x28,%rax
         mov
40073c:
                 %rax,0x8(%rsp)
         mov
400741:
                 %eax,%eax
         xor
400743:
                 %rsp,%rdi
         mov
                 4006e0 <gets>
400746:
         callq
40074b:
                 %rsp,%rdi
         mov
40074e:
         callq
                 400570 <puts@plt>
400753:
                 0x8(%rsp),%rax
         mov
400758:
                 %fs:0x28,%rax
         xor
400761:
                 400768 < echo + 0x39 >
```

jе

add

retq

callq

400763:

400768:

40076c:

Aside: %fs:0x28

- Read from memory using segmented addressing
- Segment is read-only
- Value generated randomly every time program runs

400580 < stack chk fail@plt>

Setting Up Canary

Before call to gets

```
Stack Frame
for call echo
```

Return Address (8 bytes)

> Canary (8 bytes)

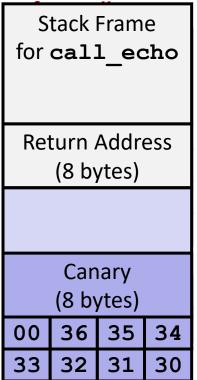
```
[3] [2] [1] [0] buf ← %rsp
```

```
/* Echo Line */
void echo()
    char buf[4]; /* Way too small! */
    gets(buf);
    puts(buf);
```

```
echo:
          %fs:40, %rax # Get canary
   movq
         %rax, 8(%rsp) # Place on stack
   movq
   xorl %eax, %eax # Erase canary
```

Checking Canary

After call to gets



```
/* Echo Line */
void echo()
{
    char buf[4]; /* Way too small! */
    gets(buf);
    puts(buf);
}
```

Input: 0123456

buf ← %rsp

```
echo:

...

movq 8(%rsp), %rax # Retrieve from stack
xorq %fs:40, %rax # Compare to canary
je .L6 # If same, OK
call __stack_chk_fail # FAIL
.L6: ...
```

Return-Oriented Programming Attacks

Challenge (for hackers)

- Stack randomization makes it hard to predict buffer location
- Marking stack nonexecutable makes it hard to insert binary code

Alternative Strategy

- Use existing code
 - E.g., library code from stdlib
- String together fragments to achieve overall desired outcome
- Does not overcome stack canaries

Construct program from gadgets

- Sequence of instructions ending in ret
 - Encoded by single byte 0xc3
- Code positions fixed from run to run
- Code is executable

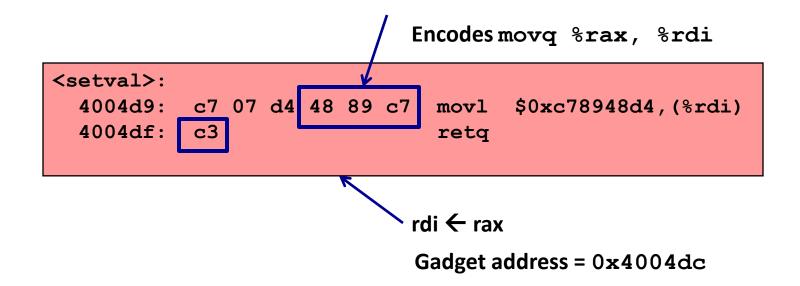
Gadget Example #1

```
long ab_plus_c
  (long a, long b, long c)
{
   return a*b + c;
}
```

Use tail end of existing functions

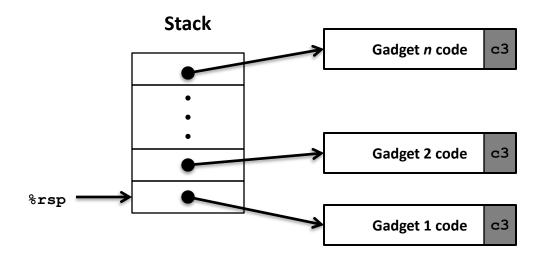
Gadget Example #2

```
void setval(unsigned *p) {
    *p = 3347663060u;
}
```



Repurpose byte codes

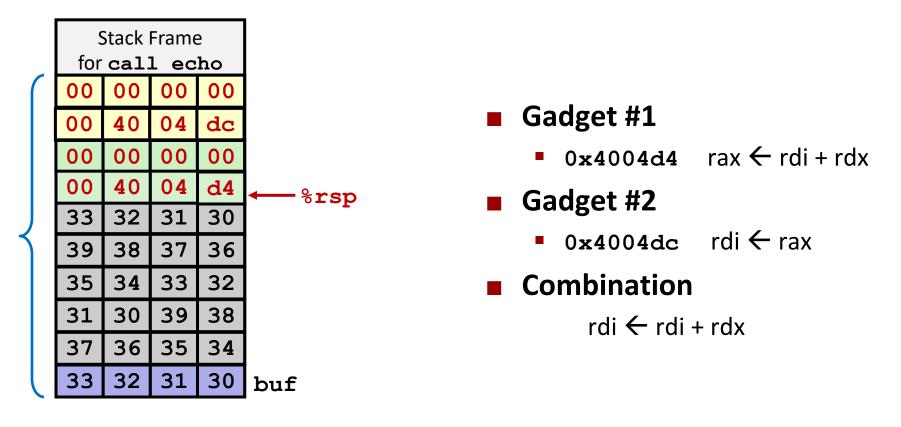
ROP Execution



- Trigger with ret instruction
 - Will start executing Gadget 1
- Final ret in each gadget will start next one

Shacham, H. (October 2007). "The geometry of innocent flesh on the bone: return-intolibc without function calls (on the x86)". *Proceedings of the 14th ACM conference on Computer and communications security - CCS '07*. pp. 552–561. ISBN 978-1-59593-703-2. doi:10.1145/1315245.1315313

Crafting an ROP Attack String

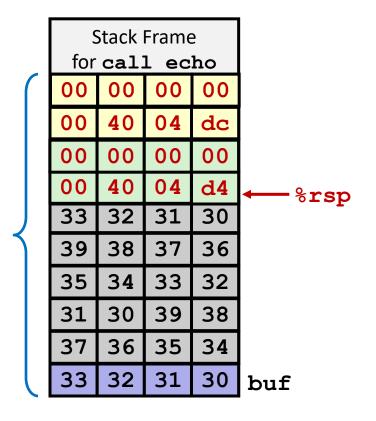


Attack String (Hex)

30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 30 31 32 33 d4 04 40 00 00 00 00 dc 04 40 00 00 00 00

Multiple gadgets will corrupt stack upwards

What Happens When echo Returns?



- Echo executes ret
 - Starts Gadget #1
- Gadget #1 executes ret
 - Starts Gadget #2
- Gadget #2 executes ret
 - Goes off somewhere ...