Information Security
CS 3002

Dr. Haroon Mahmood

Assistant Professor

NUCES Lahore

NIST's Definition: Buffer overflow

"A condition at an interface under which more input can be placed into a buffer or data holding area than the capacity allocated, overwriting other information. Attackers exploit such a condition to crash a system or to insert specially crafted code that allows them to gain control of the system."

Buffer Overflow Basics

- Caused by programming error
- Allows more data to be stored than capacity available in a fixed sized buffer
  - buffer can be on stack, heap, global data
- Overwriting adjacent memory locations
  - corruption of program data
  - unexpected transfer of control
  - memory access violation
  - execution of code chosen by attacker

Buffer Overflow Example

```
int main( int argc, char * argv[]) {
     int valid = FALSE;
     char str1[8];
     char str2[8];

     next_tag(str1);
     gets(str2);
     if ( strncmp(str1, str2, 8) == 0)
          valid = TRUE;
     printf("buffer1: str1(%s), str2(%s),
          valid(%d)\n", st  r1, str2, valid);
}
```

```
$ cc -g -o buffer1 buffer1.c
$ ./buffer1
START
buffer1: str1(START), str2(START), valid(1)
$ ./buffer1
EVILINPUTVALUE
buffer1: str1(TVALUE),
str2(EVILINPUTVALUE), valid(0)
$ ./buffer1
BADINPUTBADINPUT
buffer1: str1(BADINPUT),
str2(BADINPUTBADINPUT), valid(1)
```

Buffer Overflow Example

Memory Address	Before gets(str2)	After gets(str2)	Contains Value of
. . . .	. . . .	. . . .	
bffffbf4	34fcffbf 4 . . .	34fcffbf 3 . . .	argv
bffffbf0	01000000	01000000	argc
bffffbec	c6bd0340 . . . @	c6bd0340 . . . @	return addr
bffffbe8	08fcffbf	08fcffbf	old base ptr
bffffbe4	00000000	01000000	valid
bffffbe0	80640140 . d . @	00640140 . d . @	
bffffbdc	54001540 T . . @	4e505554 N P U T	str1[4-7]
bffffbd8	53544152 S T A R	42414449 B A D I	str1[0-3]
bffffbd4	00850408	4e505554 N P U T	str2[4-7]
bffffbd0	30561540 0 V . @	42414449 B A D I	str2[0-3]
. . . .	. . . .	. . . .	

Buffer Overflow Attacks

- To exploit a buffer overflow an attacker
  - must identify a buffer overflow vulnerability in some program
    - inspection, tracing execution, fuzzing tools
  - understand how buffer is stored in memory and determine potential for corruption

A Little Programming Language

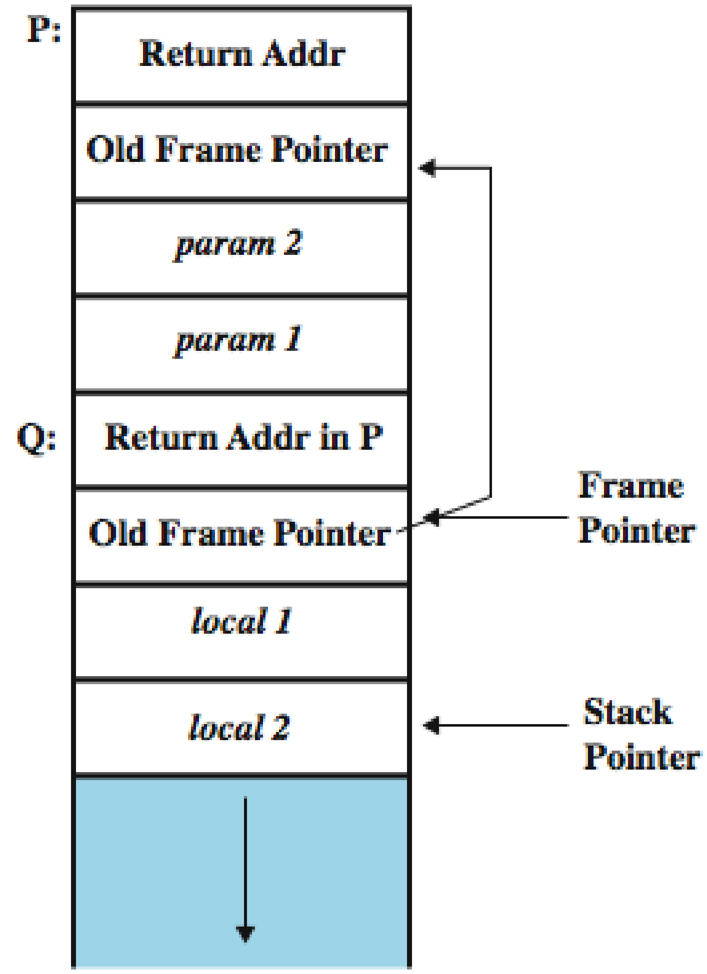
- At machine level, all data is an array of bytes
  - interpretation depends on instructions used
- Modern high-level languages have a strong notion of type and valid operations
  - not vulnerable to buffer overflows
  - does incur overhead, some limits on use
- C and related languages have high-level control structures, but allow direct access to memory
  - hence are vulnerable to buffer overflow
  - have a large legacy of widely used, unsafe, and hence vulnerable code

Function Calls and Stack Frames

Stack frame:

Calling function: needs a data structure to store the "return" address and parameters to be passed

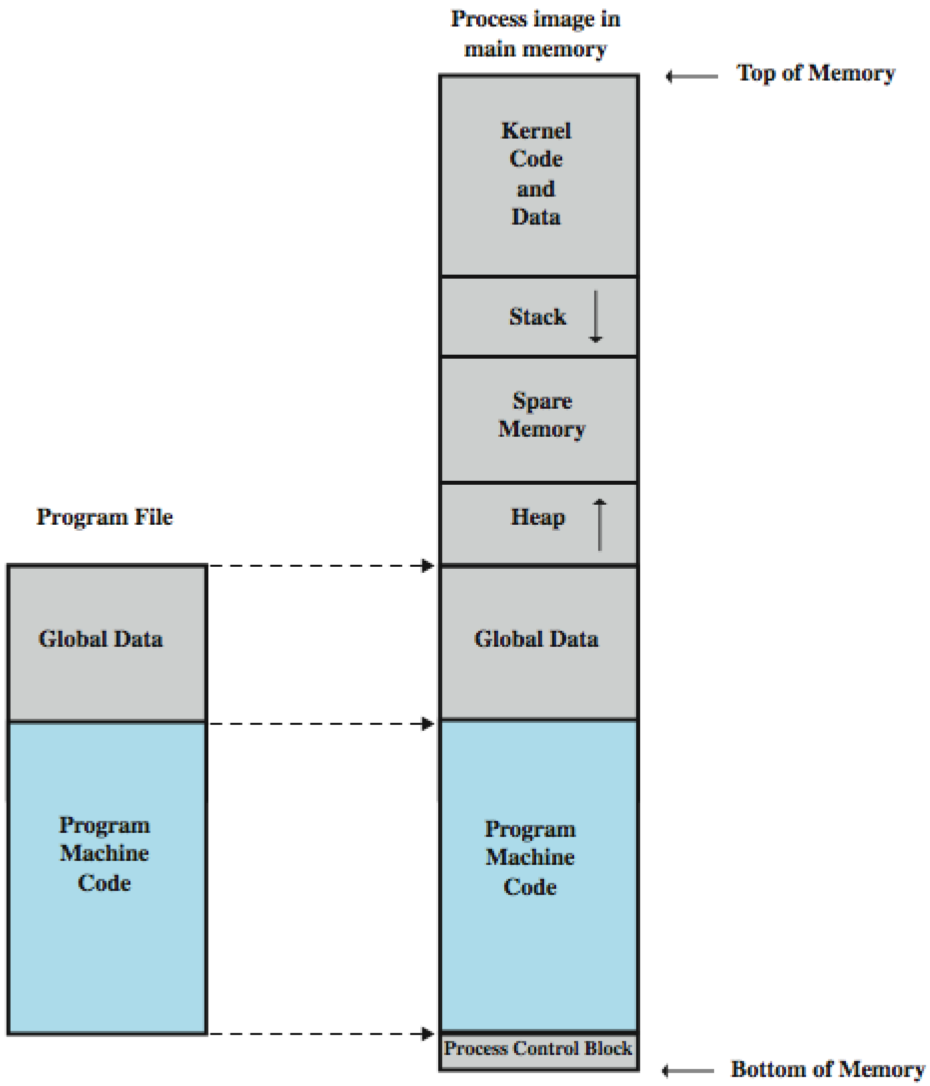
Called function: needs a place to store its local variables somewhere different for every call



Stack Buffer Overflow

- Occurs when buffer is located on stack
  - used by Morris Worm
  - “Smashing the Stack” paper popularized it
- Have local variables below saved frame pointer and return address
  - hence overflow of a local buffer can potentially overwrite these key control items
- Attacker overwrites return address with address of desired code
  - program, system library or loaded in buffer

Programs and Processes



Another Stack Overflow

```
void getinp(char *inp, int siz)
{
    puts("Input value: ");
    fgets(inp, siz, stdin);
    printf("buffer3 getinp read %s\n", inp);
}

void display(char *val)
{
    char tmp[16];
    sprintf(tmp, "read val: %s\n", val);
    puts(tmp);
}

int main(int argc, char *argv[])
{
    char buf[16];
    getinp(buf, sizeof(buf));
    display(buf);
    printf("buffer3 done\n");
}
```

Safe input function; output may still overwrite part of the stack frame (sprintf creates formatted value for a var)

Another Stack Overflow

```
$ cc -o buffer3 buffer3.c

$ ./buffer3
Input value:
SAFE
buffer3 getinp read SAFE
read val: SAFE
buffer3 done

$ ./buffer3
Input value:
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
buffer3 getinp read XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
read val: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

buffer3 done
Segmentation fault (core dumped)
```

Safe input function; output may still overwrite part of the stack frame

Common Unsafe C Functions

`gets(char *str)`	read line from standard input into str
`sprintf(char *str, char *format, ...)`	create str according to supplied format and variables
`strcat(char *dest, char *src)`	append contents of string src to string dest
`strcpy(char *dest, char *src)`	copy contents of string src to string dest
`vsprintf(char *str, char *fmt, va_list ap)`	create str according to supplied format and variables

Buffer Overflow Defenses

- Buffer overflows are widely exploited
- Large amount of vulnerable code in use
  - despite cause and countermeasures known
- Two broad defense approaches
  - compile-time - harden new programs
  - run-time - handle attacks on existing programs

Compile-Time Defenses: Programming Language

- Use a modern high-level languages with strong typing
  - not vulnerable to buffer overflow
  - compiler enforces range checks and permissible operations on variables
- Do have cost in resource use
- And restrictions on access to hardware
  - so still need some code in C like languages

Compile-Time Defenses: Safe Coding Techniques

- If using potentially unsafe languages eg C
- Programmer must explicitly write safe code
  - by design with new code
  - *extensive after code review* of existing code, (e.g., OpenBSD)
- Buffer overflow safety a subset of general safe coding techniques
- Allow for graceful failure *(know how things may go wrong)*
  - check for sufficient space in any buffer

Compile-Time Defenses: Language Extension, Safe Libraries

- **Proposals for safety extensions (library replacements) to C**
  - **performance penalties**
  - **must compile programs with special compiler**

- **Several safer standard library variants**
  - **new functions, e.g. strlcpy()**
  - **safer re-implementation of standard functions as a dynamic library, e.g. Libsafe**

Compile-Time Defenses: Stack Protection

- **Stackgaurd: add function entry and exit code to check stack for signs of corruption**
  - **Use random canary**
  - **e.g. Stackguard, Win/GS, GCC**
  - **check for overwrite between local variables and saved frame pointer and return address**
  - **abort program if change found**
  - **issues: recompilation, debugger support**
- **Or save/check safe copy of return address (in a safe, non-corruptible memory area), e.g. Stackshield, RAD**

Run-Time Defenses: Non Executable Address Space

- Many BO attacks copy machine code into buffer and transfer ctrl to it
- Use virtual memory support to make some regions of memory non-executable (to avoid exec of attacker's code)
  - e.g. stack, heap, global data
  - need h/w support in MMU
  - long existed on SPARC/Solaris systems
  - recent on x86 Linux/Unix/Windows systems
- Issues: support for executable stack code

Run-Time Defenses: Address Space Randomization

- Manipulate location of key data structures
  - stack, heap, global data: change address by 1 MB
  - using random shift for each process
  - have large address range on modern systems means wasting some has negligible impact

- Randomize location of heap buffers and location of standard library functions

Run-Time Defenses: Guard Pages

- Place guard pages between critical regions of memory (or between stack frames)
  - flagged in MMU (mem mgmt unit) as illegal addresses
  - any access aborts process
- Can even place between stack frames and heap buffers
  - at execution time and space cost

Other Overflow Attacks

- have a range of other attack variants
  - stack overflow variants
  - heap overflow
  - global data overflow
  - format string overflow
  - integer overflow
- more likely to be discovered in future
- some cannot be prevented except by coding to prevent originally