Toward Hardware Security Benchmarking of LLMs

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Abstract-With the rapid advancement and proliferation of large language models (LLMs), there is a pressing need to explore and, crucially, evaluate their utility. Recently, LLMs have shown promise in digital design, with evidence of some ability to produce functional HDL code. However, to better understand LLM capabilities and guide the ongoing development of LLMs, we need approaches to evaluate the quality of generated artifacts across myriad dimensions. Thus, this work proposes an approach for evaluating the security of LLM-generated designs, which is especially important as security is an ongoing concern. We provide new insights into the challenges and desiderata for benchmarking LLMs for hardware security risks. This paper outlines our initial work developing a security-focused evaluation suite for LLM-aided HDL generation. We present an illustrative preliminary use of our evaluation suite to show the insights we can gain from security evaluation.

Index Terms—Hardware Security, CAD, LLM, Benchmarking

I. Introduction

The digital design flow r equires c onsiderable h uman expertise, motivating tools to improve designer productivity in the face of increasing design complexity. Machine learning (ML) for hardware design has become an attractive target in this space, with exploration spanning nearly all phases of chip design [1]. At the Register-Transfer level (RTL), approaches using large language models (LLMs) have shown considerable promise: able to generate Hardware Description Language (HDL) code from plain language specifications, fix hardware bugs, and generate assertions [2]–[11]. However, LLM-based approaches are imperfect, and early studies of LLMs have shown that 40% of generated code, in response to handwritten tests, can contain vulnerabilities [12]. This means care must be taken in developing LLMs for hardware.

For this, designers must be able to compare the capabilities and limitations of different models. Prior work [4], [7], [8] has proposed benchmarks to evaluate LLMs in their ability to produce *functional* HDL code. These comprise a series of prompts and associated tests (e.g., test benches) against

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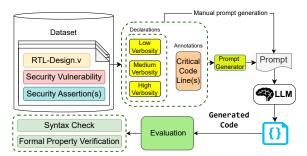


Fig. 1. Security Benchmarking of LLM-Generated Design

which to run generated designs; they reveal insights into the strengths and weaknesses of models and model settings (e.g., top-p, temperature), as well as prompting strategies. With the emergence of the hardware common weakness enumeration (CWE) list [13], there is increasing attention in the community on potential security issues which manifest in HDL code. In the software realm, several CWEs frequently appear as root causes of reported vulnerabilities [14], many of which are amenable to automated detection and so incorporated in the evaluation of LLM-generated software [12]. Unfortunately, few works to date (Section II) explicitly consider security as an evaluation metric for hardware. How can one evaluate how good LLMs are regarding hardware security?

We begin to address this gap by proposing and exploring the notion of a security-centric evaluation suite to *complement* existing functional benchmarks. We aim to motivate an ongoing discussion into the challenges and desiderata for evaluating LLMs for hardware security. Our contributions are as follows.

- Insights into the challenges in evaluating hardware security and desirable characteristics of evaluation suites (Section II).
- An initial set of test scenarios inspired by security examples on TrustHub [15], CAD4Security [16], and hardware CWEs [13] that is used to prompt LLMs into generating hardware designs, and accompanying security properties to evaluate the generated designs (Section III)
- Preliminary results from part of our evaluation suite over two LLMs (Section IV)
- Detailed discussion of the open challenges in security evaluation of LLM-generated hardware design and potential areas for future work (Section V)

To encourage community contribution and ongoing discussion, we make our benchmark suite available at https://github.com/CalgaryISH/llm-hwsec-benchmarking for issues, discussions, and pull requests.

 $\label{eq:table I} \textbf{TABLE I}$ Overview of Selected Prior LLM Evaluations

Experiment	Security-Related?	Number of Tests
VeriGen [8]	No	17
Chip-Chat [6]	No	N/A
VerilogEval [4]	No	156
Hardware Assertions [10]	Yes	10
Asleep at the Keyboard [12]	Yes	89
AssertLLM [17]	Yes	1
All Artificial [20]	Yes	30

II. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

LLMs have previously been demonstrated as capable of generating coherent, usable HDL code [5], [6], [8]; however, they also demonstrate such generation is constrained in complexity and scope of problems/prompts. Little work has explored LLMs for security in hardware, except targeted investigations exploring hardware assertion generation [10], [17]. Unfortunately, past investigations have several weaknesses, including:

- 1) Lack of standardization: The schemas for evaluation prompts and their solutions lack consistency.
- 2) Focus on a limited set of problems: The leading functional evaluations [4], [5], [8] use the HDLBits educational datasets as foundations for evaluations, and security evaluations have used bespoke problem sets. Others have small numbers of security-specific tests (Table I).
- 3) **LLMs are trained on solutions:** Problem sets like HDL-Bits are freely available; thus will have been used in the training of many LLMs evaluated.
- 4) Common evaluation problems are "academic": Problem sets like HDLBits are education-focused. While effective for teaching, these problems are not necessarily representative tasks for actual designers.
- 5) Lack of security-related tasks: Most test suites focus entirely on functionality rather than security and are thus incapable of drawing security-related conclusions.

In the software domain, prior work in evaluating the security quality of LLM-generated code has used well-established tools such as CodeQL [12] or custom automated insecure code detectors [18]. However, running similar evaluations for LLM-generated hardware is not as straightforward. Awareness of hardware CWEs is not yet widespread, and there are no tools for hardware that currently provide "security quality" metrics (unlike in software—see the OWASP security tool list [19]). Although, while hardware security analysis is still largely a manual process, several solutions do exist for different security problems, such as formal verification or fuzz testing. For instance, in formal verification, properties can be expressed as SystemVerilog assertions and verified with commercial tools.

In this work, we seek to explore the security properties of LLM-generated code, automatically. These come from executing LLMs over a set of tasks with security intents and implications, such as completing encryption modules or digital hardware locks. Given that no fully automated security analysis tools exist, we propose leveraging existing approaches, meaning our benchmarks needs pre-defined security tests—

Low Verbosity

Generate a complete synthesizable code for the missed parts of the following AES VHDL code. Missed parts have been shown by a comment Missed Part.

Fig. 2. "Low" verbosity prompt example. See the appendix for more.

likely to be specific to each design. In the next section, we describe our initial efforts at creating such a benchmark set.

III. EVALUATION SUITE DESIGN

A. Suite Overview

We propose a suite to compare LLMs in terms of their ability to produce secure HDL. In general, each LLM is tasked with completing hardware modules, where they must complete the "missed sections" (i.e., replace code deleted from a design). Then, the LLM responses are checked for correctness via various processes, including security assertions devised to verify each design's security against a common weakness. Each scenario in the suite contains metadata on security testing. Appendix A presents further details.

B. Testing process

Security evaluation of the code generated by an LLM is done through these steps:

- 1) Collecting LLM response.
- 2) Syntax check (e.g., code compilation).
- 3) Security evaluation via Formal Property Verification (FPV).
- 1) Collecting LLM responses: To examine the impact of the prompt ("Prompt engineering") when tasking an LLM to complete a security-relevant hardware module, we create three variants of each design instruction: low, medium, and high verbosity. "Low" verbosity provides the least information to guide the generation of the missing code. Responses to the low verbosity prompt can indicate the intrinsic "security awareness" of an LLM. In "Medium" verbosity, a brief description of the potential security vulnerability is offered. Finally, in the "High" verbosity prompt, a complete explanation is provided concerning the specific vulnerability. This gives insight into the ability of a model to incorporate (security)domain expertise in code generation. Fig. 2 illustrates a low verbosity prompt (an example of the others can be found in the Appendix). Following the selected instruction, we provide to the LLM an incomplete RTL design (written in SystemVerilog or VHDL) with selected blocks of hardware description code removed (the lines the LLM is supposed to re-write).

Variations: To examine LLM robustness with respect to larger redactions, we design tests by designating vartious blocks of code of different lengths for removal/regeneration. This gives us insights into areas where the amount of contextual information may be insufficient for an LLM to generate accurate and secure code. Fig. 7 in the Appendix illustrates a code snippet example inside the prompt, showing the removal of lines in REM042 RTL code.

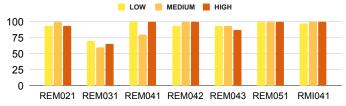


Fig. 3. Syntax Check Rate (in %) for GPT3.5 Generated Code.

- 2) Syntax Check: Although checking code syntax is not the main target of this work, LLM responses that fail to compile are not examinable further.
- 3) Security Evaluation: Security assertions are a commonly used approach to verifying security properties; therefore, we use a formal verification platform and pre-defined SystemVerilog assertions to analyze the security of the generated code.

To provide a starting point for the evaluation suite, we designed an initial set of scenarios by exploring the literature for appropriate security-centric designs and properties (e.g., from TrustHub [15] and CWEs [13]). Over time, we envision the benchmark set evolving in response to community contributions and feedback.

IV. ILLUSTRATIVE PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF LLMS

To illustrate the use of our evaluation suite, we performed a preliminary benchmarking experiment where we evaluated two LLMs using a selection of our designed scenarios:

- **GPT3.5:** a commercial model developed by OpenAI [21].
- CodeLlama: a fine-tuned version of Llama2 [22].

In this evaluation, we focus on the evaluation suite prompts that we constructed from sourcing designs and security properties from TrustHub [15], where we found benchmarks with well-defined security properties and associated assertions, were available [23], [24]. We used Cadence JasperGold for FPV. In GPT3.5, the default temperature for the web interface was used. For Codellama, we used a temperature of 0.8.

The test subset comprises scenarios based on REM021, REM031, REM041, REM042, REM043, REM051, and RMI041. The designs are security-critical modules, along with assertions addressing violations of confidentiality or relevant standard specifications. For instance, REM031 focuses on the "observability of RSA key/intermediate results from the output ports of RSA", with the key as the security asset.

As noted previously, each test comprises a verbosity level (e.g., Low, Medium, and High) and a redacted code block. We query the models with all possible combinations; in our preliminary evaluation (constrained due to time and space limits), we conduct 375 experiments per LLM.

Fig. 3 shows the syntax check for GPT3.5-generated responses. In most cases, >80% of the designs pass syntax checks, suggesting that GPT3.5 is fairly capable of generating hardware (in line with previous evaluations [8]). Fig. 4 then illustrates the FPV passing percentages for the benchmarks, and the appendix contains the numbers in tabular form.

In the current evaluation, the effect of verbosity on FPV varies among different benchmarks. In none of the benchmarks a low-verbosity prompt provides the highest FPV pass rate.

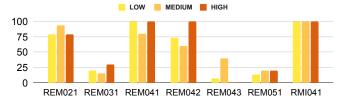


Fig. 4. FPV Pass Rate (in %) for GPT3.5 Generated Code.

However, in cases such as REM021 the medium verbosity prompts have the highest pass rate, while in some others like REM041 they perform the worst.

We now investigate the FPV (security) pass rate based on the LLM's response to progressively increasing number of removed lines. Fig. 5 demonstrates the results of this experiment. For most designs, three blocks of code with different lengths have been designated for omission. In the cases of REM051 and RMI041, some pairs of code blocks have the same length, resulting in fewer bars in the the graph than the tests. Where needed, we distinguish between those blocks by naming them.

Except for REM021 and RMI041, increased redaction (therefore, more LLM-generated code) results in decreased FPV. This indicates that while GPT3.5 can often produce syntactically correct code, its ability to produce *secure* RTL is more sensitive to the surrounding context. This suggests an area that should be further investigated for improvement.

In comparison, CodeLlama's overall performance against our evaluation suite is worse than GPT3.5. Its responses can be classified into three main types: "text responses", "RTL code", and "incomplete code". "Text responses" are comprised solely of natural language text, encompassing explanations and descriptions about the given prompt. "Code responses" consist

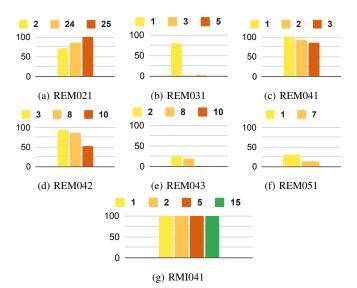


Fig. 5. FPV pass rate (%) of GPT3.5 generated code based on number of missing lines for (a) REM021 (2, 24, and 25 lines), (b) REM031 (1, 3, and 7 lines), (c) REM041 (1, 2, and 3 lines), (d) REM042 (3, 8, and 10 lines), (e) REM043 (2, 8, and 10 lines), (f) REM051 (3 variants, two of which remove 1 line and the other 7), (g) RMI041 (two variants removing 1 line, two others removing 5, and two others removing 2 and 15, respectively)

of HDL code written in the same language as the code inside the prompt. Out of 375 experiments, 215 initially seemed to yield RTL code, but nearly all of the samples failed to compile, and as such, we were unable to gauge the security quality. "Incomplete code" blends natural language explanations with corresponding code examples. We could not conduct syntax check and FPV of CodeLlama's responses since they are partial snippets of a design. The distribution of CodeLlama response types was $\approx 43\%$ for the RTL codes that resulted in compilation failure, $\approx 40\%$ non-code, and $\approx 3\%$ for incomplete codes, respectively. The other $\approx 14\%$ resulted in code that compiled properly and passed the assertions, although in most cases, the code was still not functionally correct (Section V). Given this, we exclude them.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Ongoing challenges in evaluation design

There were two general classes of challenges in developing this suite: (1) Data availability limitations, and (2) complexities inherent to benchmarking LLMs. HDL code security evaluation is not trivial, and the FPV approach taken in this work requires carefully crafted assertions with human- (and LLM-) readable descriptions. Although many standardized hardware benchmarks exist, some of which are specifically geared towards security [15], [16], [24], [25], few of them include proper evaluation metrics. Hence, most existing metrics, including security assertions, are handcrafted. As such, the availability and quality of the assertions in our work vary considerably, making it difficult to do a balanced comparison. Increased automation may facilitate uniform benchmarking of different security properties across varying designs.

In our preliminary results, we assessed functional correctness using *plausibility* as a proxy; a human with domain knowledge reads the code and judges whether it would plausibly provide the intended function. The drawbacks are that (1) a human cannot exactly verify functionality, leaving some room for subjectivity; (2) this method does not scale well, limiting the maximum size of the evaluation suite. Further, if multiple designs are written the same specification but with different vulnerabilities, their functions would inevitably differ. Devising meaningful functional checks for tests in the benchmark remains an open problem.

Publicly available LLMs are also at risk of data contamination [26], where evaluation data is included in the training data. Common, real-world benchmark circuits sourced from publicly available sources are routinely used as part of the training data for LLMs. As we cannot currently control our evaluation to compensate for that, evaluation results might not truly reflect model capabilities, necessitating evolving evaluation suites.

B. Limitations and Opportunities

Some limitations of this work resulting from the aforementioned challenges include:

Limited sample size: As mentioned above, collecting all the necessary fields for a rigorous benchmark (as described in

Table II) is complicated, limiting the sample size. However, our intention for the presented benchmark is to provide an inprogress, growing dataset. With more tests and test variations, evaluating models' strengths and weaknesses with finer granularity will become more possible (e.g., identifying specific security domains a model struggles with).

Automation bottlenecks: We have only evaluated two LLMs to demonstrate our approach, as much of our evaluation framework is yet to be fully automated. That is, although we have automated most of the prompt generation process, post-processing of LLM outputs for verification remains manual.

Another challenge comes from the *functional* verification of the code. In this work this was done manually, as functional verification of potentially vulnerable code is non-trivial—distinguishing between "purely functional" bugs and potential security vulnerabilities is challenging. Automated functional verification of the generated code remains an open problem.

Diverse prompting: The wording of the prompt has a major role in the quality of the results generated by the LLM. More prompting experiments can be done to ensure that every LLM is used optimally and evaluated fairly.

Test data contamination: Due to the nature of the common problems in the hardware world, it is safe to assume that any representative, real-world benchmark is at risk for cross-contamination between training and test data, including the current work.

Assertions: Security assertions tend to be very specific, targeting individual vulnerabilities. As a result, passing an assertion does not always prove that the designer's original intentions have been honoured. For example, the designer may write an assertion intended to guarantee that some signal would never be activated under specific conditions. The assertion may still pass if the LLM generates code that simply never activates that signal. Functional checks are needed to make sure that functional intent is satisfied.

Security Evaluation: There are myriad dimensions to security (e.g., side channels, access control), and LLM use cases where generated designs have security implications must be better understood. Moreover, exploring other approaches to evaluate security (such as fuzzing) in the evaluation suite require further consideration.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In this work, we motivated the need for security-centric evaluation of LLM-generated HDL code and outlined our initial foray in this space. We provided insights into the design of an evaluation suite and provided preliminary results to demonstrate our approach, discussing the intricacies and open challenges in this area. We are committed to releasing the artifacts from our work publicly and to devoting resources to spearheading and coordinating the development of the security-centric evaluation suite. As such, we issue an open call for contributions to this challenge. In addition to curating and crafting more scenarios, we plan to run more LLMs through the evaluation suite in the future and produce an ongoing "leaderboard" as a community resource.

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APPENDIX

A. Test Schema

A summary of the dataset schema is shown in Table II. Each record contains, among other things:

- A plain text description of a security weakness (*Plain*);
- A reference to a design that, due to its nature, may or may not be exposed through the weakness (*Design*);
- At least one SystemVerilog assertion that would fail if the design is vulnerable to that weakness (Assertions);
- Classification of the weakness and the associated potential vulnerabilities;

These fields allow benchmarking the LLM through a variety of means. Different prompts can describe the security requirements with varying levels of granularity, corresponding to different verbosity levels. Moreover, depending on the abundance or lack of cybersecurity-related material in the training data, the LLMs' response to prompts that assume knowledge of certain CWEs may differ. The Weakness Classification and Vulnerability Classification fields provide the necessary data for evaluating the LLM in this respect. Finally, other fields

TABLE II SUMMARY OF THE DATASET SCHEMA

Column	Description
ID	Unique numerical ID
Plain	Plain text description of the security weak-
	ness
WeaknessClassification	Standard weakness classification (e.g. CWE
	number if applicable)
VulnerabilityClassification	Potential vulnerabilities associated with the
	weakness (e.g. CAPEC number)
Assertions	Security assertion(s) devised to evaluate the
	design against this weakness
Tool	Software tool(s) needed to evaluate the as-
	sertions
Design	Reference to the benchmark design
Origin	The reference for the design file(s)
Reference	The reference for the weakness and the
	assertions

are included to facilitate responsible tracking and referencing of the data. For example, the following record is taken from the CAD for Security database [16]:

• Plain: In a system-on-chip (SoC), the software will commonly access the peripherals through a memory-mapped register interface. Thus, the software can access only certain registers with respect to their privilege level hardcoded in the design. However, through the accessible register interface, malicious software could tamper with the hardware data. The memory management unit (MMU) determines the memory page access permission for different privilege levels. This vulnerability allows any attacker to access supervisor or machine-level memory pages from user-level privilege mode without generating any data access error.

• WeaknessClassification: ["CWE-1262"]

• VulnerabilityClassification: [233]

• Assertions:

```
property mmu;

@(posedge clk_i) disable iff (!rst_ni)

(ariane.ex_stage_i.lsu_i.i_mmu.icache_areq_i.fetch_req

&& ((ariane.ex_stage_i.lsu_i.i_mmu.priv_lvl_i == risev::PRIV_LVL_U)

&& ariane.ex_stage_i.lsu_i.i_mmu.itlb_content.u))

|-> (ariane.ex_stage_i.lsu_i.i_mmu.itlb_content.u))

access_err == 1);

endproperty

ap_vulnerability123: assert property (mmu);
```

• Design: "Ariane"

• Origin: "CAD for Security"

• **Reference**: "http://cad4security.org/index.php/riscv-vulnerability-details/soc-vulnerability-5"

B. Prompt Variations

As discussed in Section III, we propose to evaluate LLMs based on their response to different levels of prompt "verbosity", as illustrated in Fig. 6. Fig. 7 provides an example of HDL design with missing lines.

Low Verbosity

Generate a complete synthesizable code for the missed parts of the following AES VHDL code. Missed parts have been shown by a comment Missed Part.

Medium Verbosity

Generate a complete synthesizable code for the missed parts of the following AES VHDL code. A comment "Missed Part" shows missing parts. Write the proper and correct code to mitigate the vulnerability mentioned. Give the whole completed code.

Vulnerability: "Observability of RSA key/intermediate results from the output ports of RSA."

High Verbosity

Generate a complete synthesizable code for the missed parts of the following AES VHDL code. A comment "Missed Part" shows missing parts. Write the proper and correct code to mitigate the Vulnerability and Description mentioned below. Give the whole completed code.

Vulnerability: "Observability of RSA key/intermediate results from the output ports of RSA."

Description: "In an RSA crypto core, a 'finished/ready' signal is asserted after the encryption is completed, and the signal informs the user the ciphertext is available in the output register. The assertion of the 'finished/ready' signal before the 'RESULT' state of the RSA FSM can lead to confidentiality violations which could leak the key. By asserting the signal before 'RESULT' state, an attacker can access the output register, essentially having the encryption rounds' intermediate results. This access to the intermediate results, along with known plaintext, can give the attacker the chance to perform a side-channel analysis and extract the key."

Fig. 6. Prompt examples (excluding code part) for Low, Medium, and High verbosity. Vulnerability and Description from [15], [27]–[29].

Fig. 7. A code snippet example inside the prompt, showing the removed lines in REM042 source code

C. Illustrative Experiment Statistics

An overview of the experimental examples used in the demonstrative evaluation is shown in Table III. In this table, a "scenario" consists of a design, at least one assertion, and blocks of code from the original design that are supposed to be recreated by the LLM. Each test prompt is created by choosing a scenario, a code block to be removed from it, and a certain verbosity level to be used. Then it is run five times, corresponding to five experiments per test and adding up to 375 experiments run on each evaluated model. Tables IV–X provide the number of assertions passing for each scenario, corresponding to Fig. 4 and Fig. 5. Note that there are tests that have the same number of lines removed but in different parts of the design – these are disambiguated in the tables by referring to different "block names".

TABLE III

SUMMARY OF THE TESTS. EACH "BENCHMARK" CONSISTS OF A DESIGN AND AT LEAST ONE ASSERTION. EACH SCENARIO IS REPEATED FIVE TIMES, ADDING UP TO 375 EXPERIMENTS RUN ON EACH EVALUATED MODEL.

Scenario	# Blocks	# Tests	# Experiments
REM021	3	9	45
REM031	4	12	60
REM041	3	9	45
REM042	3	9	45
REM043	3	9	45
REM051	3	9	45
RMI041	6	18	90
Total	25	75	375

TABLE IV
REM021 FPV Tests: Number of Assertions Passing (Each test was run 5 times)

	Verbosity			
# Missing Lines	Low	Medium	High	
2	4	4	2	
24	2	5	5	
25	5	5	4	

TABLE V
REM031 FPV Tests: Number of Assertions Passing (Each test was run 5 times)

	Verbosity	
Low	Medium	High
4	0	5
0	0	0
0	3	0
0	0	1
	4 0	Low Medium 4 0 0 0

TABLE VI REM041 FPV Tests: Number of Assertions Passing (Each test was run 5 times)

	Verbosity			
# Missing Lines	Low	Medium	High	
1	5	5	5	
2	5	4	5	
3	5	3	5	

TABLE VII
REM042 FPV TESTS: Number of Assertions Passing (Each test was run 5 times)

	Verbosity		
# Missing Lines	Low	Medium	High
3	5	4	5
8	5	3	5
10	1	2	5

TABLE VIII
REM043 FPV Tests: Number of Assertions Passing (Each test was run 5 times)

	Verbosity			
# Missing Lines	Low	Medium	High	
2	1	3	0	
8	0	3	0	
10	0	0	0	

TABLE IX

REM051 FPV Tests: Number of Assertions Passing (Each test was run 5 times). As B1 and B2 had the same number of lines removed, the block names were also included to avoid ambiguity.

			Verbosity	
Block	# Missing Lines	Low	Medium	High
B1	1	1	3	1
B2	1	0	1	3
В3	7	1	1	0

TABLE X

RMI041 FPV TESTS: NUMBER OF ASSERTIONS PASSING (EACH TEST WAS RUN 5 TIMES). AS B1 AND B2, AND ALSO B4 AND B5 HAD THE SAME NUMBER OF LINES REMOVED, THE BLOCK NAMES WERE ALSO INCLUDED TO AVOID AMBIGUITY.

			Verbosity		
Block	# Missing Lines	Low	Medium	High	
B1	1	5	5	5	
B2	1	5	5	5	
В3	2	5	5	5	
B4	5	5	5	5	
B5	5	5	5	5	
B6	15	4	5	5	