Integrating Static and Dynamic Analysis for Secure Hardware Control: A Ghidra Plugin within DECAF Framework

Rohith Kumar Kalisetti
Department of ECE
George Mason University
G01410445
rkaliset@gmu.edu

***Abstract*—In the modern landscape of software and hardware interaction, ensuring secure and efficient resource utilization has become paramount. This paper presents a comprehensive exploration of a Ghidra-based plugin developed as an integral component of a larger system—DECAF, a QEMU-based full-system introspection platform. The Ghidra plugin is designed to statically analyze control flow paths and compute valid execution contexts for critical functions within applications. By incorporating advanced features such as recursive tracing, depth-controlled analysis, and handling indirect computed calls with overestimation, the plugin generates exhaustive control flow graphs. These graphs are subsequently utilized by the enforcement plugin within DECAF to enable or disable hardware components dynamically, ensuring a robust form of Control Flow Integrity (CFI).**

This work not only demonstrates the technical depth of the Ghidra plugin's static analysis capabilities but also integrates it seamlessly with runtime enforcement in DECAF. The results showcase the plugin's efficacy in maintaining low overhead while achieving dynamic feature management, optimized system emulation, and enhanced security against control flow attacks. This collaborative approach underscores the potential of combining static and dynamic analysis techniques to safeguard hardware resources against adversarial exploitation, making it a significant step forward in the domain of hardware debloating and dynamic feature management.

***Index Terms*—Ghidra, Reverse Engineering, Call Graphs, Computed Calls, Recursive Functions, Function Tracing, Control Flow Integrity (CFI), Static Analysis, Dynamic Feature Management, DECAF, QEMU-based Introspection, Hardware Debloating, Computed Calls, Control Flow Graph, Security Analysis**

I. Introduction

The exponential growth of software complexity and its integration with diverse hardware systems have introduced new security and performance challenges. Modern applications, particularly those operating in high-stakes environments such as embedded systems, IoT devices, and high-performance computing, require mechanisms to ensure secure and efficient interaction with hardware. One critical aspect of system security is controlling access to hardware resources based on valid execution contexts, thereby mitigating risks such as unauthorized access or malicious exploitation.

Ghidra, an open-source reverse engineering framework developed by the National Security Agency (NSA), has become a leading tool for analyzing binary executables and performing static code analysis [1]. Its powerful decompilation capabilities, combined with an extensible plugin architecture, make it well-suited for integration into security and analysis pipelines. However, Ghidra's utility is significantly enhanced when coupled with runtime introspection tools capable of dynamically enforcing control flow integrity (CFI).

This paper introduces a Ghidra-based plugin integrated into the DECAF (Dynamic Event-Capturing Framework) runtime system, a QEMU-based full-system introspection tool [3]. The plugin bridges static and dynamic analyses by precomputing all potential execution contexts for target functions [5]. The primary goal is to secure critical hardware components by ensuring that only authorized execution flows can interact with these resources.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the system architecture. The Ghidra plugin extracts valid call paths, including direct, computed, and unresolved calls, and generates a control flow graph (CFG) for each target function. These CFGs are integrated into DECAF for runtime monitoring, where the current call stack is compared against valid paths to enforce control flow integrity.

The Ghidra plugin performs static control flow analysis, identifying both direct and computed calls in the program's call graph. For computed calls that cannot be statically resolved, the plugin generates overestimated control flow paths, ensuring comprehensive coverage of potential execution scenarios [4]. It separates valid direct edges from computed call paths, producing a detailed control flow graph (CFG) for each target function. These CFGs are then fed into DECAF, where runtime enforcement compares the program's call stack to the precomputed CFG. If the stack matches a valid path, hardware access is granted; otherwise, the operation is denied.

The contributions of this work are:

- Development of a Ghidra plugin capable of analyzing static control flows, including direct and computed calls, with overestimation for unresolved references.
- Integration of the plugin with DECAF, enabling runtime CFI enforcement to control hardware access based on validated call stacks.

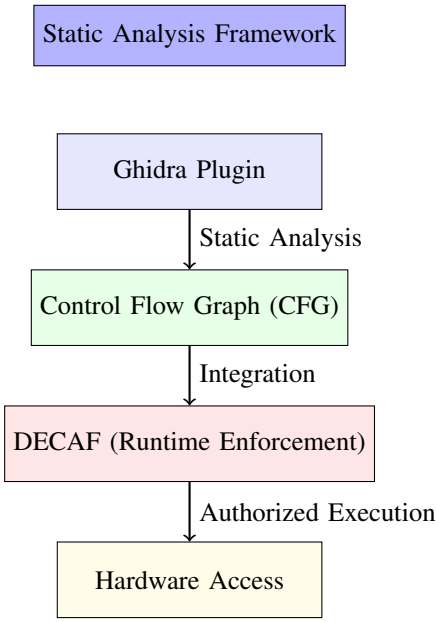

Fig. 1. Overview of the Ghidra Plugin Integrated with DECAF Framework for Control Flow Integrity Enforcement

- Validation through testing, demonstrating the system's ability to prevent control flow hijacking attacks, such as Return-Oriented Programming (ROP) and Call-Oriented Programming (COP), with negligible performance overhead.

This system addresses critical security challenges in embedded systems and IoT devices, where constrained hardware and strict performance requirements complicate traditional defenses. Combining Ghidra's static analysis capabilities with DECAF's dynamic enforcement provides robust protection against control flow attacks, thereby improving hardware security without imposing significant overhead [6].

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section II delves into the design and implementation of the Ghidra plugin. Section III discusses the integration of the plugin into the DECAF framework and its runtime enforcement mechanism. Section IV evaluates the system's performance and effectiveness through case studies. Finally, Section V concludes the paper and outlines potential future work.

II. Background

Reverse engineering plays a pivotal role in the fields of cybersecurity and system analysis. It involves deconstructing software or hardware to understand its underlying architecture, functionality, and vulnerabilities. With the increasing complexity of modern software systems, tools that facilitate reverse engineering have become indispensable. Among these, **Ghidra**, developed by the National Security Agency (NSA), stands out as a robust and feature-rich open-source reverse engineering tool [1].

A. Reverse Engineering

Reverse engineering is employed for various purposes, including malware analysis, vulnerability discovery, and software interoperability [2]. The ability to dissect binaries and analyze their execution paths is critical in identifying vulnerabilities and securing systems. This project leverages reverse engineering not as a standalone process but as a foundational element in enforcing **Control Flow Integrity (CFI)**, a concept integral to preventing exploitation of software vulnerabilities [4].

CFI ensures that the control flow of a program adheres to its intended execution paths, thus mitigating risks associated with control flow hijacking. Achieving CFI requires a comprehensive understanding of all potential control flow paths, both direct and indirect, within a program. This need forms the cornerstone of the integration between Ghidra and the **Dynamic Enforcement of Control-flow and Access Framework (DECAF)** [5].

B. Ghidra: An Overview

Ghidra, the NSA's open-source reverse engineering suite, has revolutionized the field of static analysis. Offering a rich feature set, including a decompiler, scripting support, and extensibility through plugins, Ghidra enables in-depth binary analysis. Its ability to statically analyze binaries and extract control flow information is particularly relevant to this project [1].

Ghidra provides several capabilities that are leveraged by the plugin developed in this work:

- **Static Analysis**: Identification of control flow paths, including direct function calls, computed calls, and recursive paths [2].
- **Extensibility**: The plugin framework allows developers to add custom functionality, as demonstrated by this project [1].
- **Computed Call Handling**: Ghidra's p-code architecture facilitates the detection of indirect calls, which is critical for accurate control flow analysis [5].
- **Interactive Exploration**: The interface enables analysts to visualize and verify the results of automated analysis.

While Ghidra excels in static analysis, it lacks dynamic enforcement capabilities. This limitation is addressed by integrating its outputs into the DECAF framework [3].

C. DECAF and QEMU Framework

DECAF is a QEMU-based system introspection tool that allows for full-system dynamic analysis [3]. It provides a runtime environment capable of monitoring and enforcing control flow rules. By combining the static analysis capabilities of Ghidra with the runtime introspection of DECAF, this project achieves a hybrid approach to enforcing CFI.

In this setup, the Ghidra plugin generates comprehensive control flow graphs (CFGs) for a binary. These CFGs are fed into DECAF, which monitors the program execution at runtime. If the execution deviates from the precomputed control flow paths, access to critical hardware components

is restricted. This mechanism not only ensures CFI but also provides a robust defense against advanced persistent threats [6].

D. Control Flow Integrity and Its Role

CFI is a cornerstone of modern software security. It protects against attacks such as **Return-Oriented Programming (ROP)** and **Jump-Oriented Programming (JOP)**, where an attacker hijacks the control flow of a program to execute malicious payloads [4]. By validating each control transfer against a predefined set of legal targets, CFI ensures that only intended execution paths are followed.

Static analysis tools like Ghidra are indispensable in generating the control flow paths required for CFI. However, static analysis alone is insufficient for runtime enforcement, as it cannot account for dynamic program behavior such as just-in-time (JIT) compilation or self-modifying code [5]. This limitation is overcome by DECAF's runtime enforcement mechanism, which validates control flow during program execution.

E. Challenges in Static and Dynamic Analysis

Combining static and dynamic analysis introduces several challenges:

1) **Handling Computed Calls**: Computed calls, such as those made through function pointers, pose a significant challenge in static analysis. The Ghidra plugin addresses this by overestimating potential targets where resolution is ambiguous [4].
2) **Depth Control**: Recursive and deeply nested call chains require careful analysis to ensure completeness without overwhelming computational resources [5].
3) **Overestimation**: While overestimation increases the conservativeness of static analysis, it must be balanced to avoid excessive false positives [3].
4) **Integration Overhead**: Seamless integration between Ghidra and DECAF is critical for real-time performance [6].

Despite these challenges, the combined use of Ghidra and DECAF provides a powerful framework for control flow validation.

F. The Ghidra Plugin: Enhancing Static Analysis

The Ghidra plugin developed for this project builds upon the tool's core capabilities, adding functionality to identify and analyze:

- **Direct Function Calls**: These are straightforward calls identified from the binary's control flow graph.
- **Computed Calls**: The plugin uses p-code operations to resolve indirect call targets and records unresolved calls for further analysis.
- **Recursive Call Chains**: Depth control mechanisms ensure that recursive calls are traced comprehensively without infinite loops.
- **Overestimation Handling**: For unresolved computed calls, the plugin logs all potential targets, ensuring that critical paths are not missed [5].

G. Complementary Roles of Ghidra and DECAF

While Ghidra generates a static map of all possible execution paths, DECAF dynamically monitors the program's execution to enforce these constraints. This complementary relationship ensures that the system achieves high security with minimal runtime overhead [3].

The combined framework has been validated using simple test cases, demonstrating its ability to restrict access to hardware components based on control flow validation. Future work includes extending the plugin's capabilities to handle more complex binaries and integrating additional enforcement policies within DECAF [5].

III. Implementation

A. Objectives and Requirements

The primary objective of this work is to develop a Ghidra plugin that enhances static analysis for control flow validation. The key goals include:

- Performing static analysis to generate control flow graphs (CFGs) for target binaries.
- Identifying both direct function calls and computed calls.
- Handling unresolved computed calls through an overestimation mechanism.
- Integrating with the DECAF runtime introspection tool for runtime enforcement of Control Flow Integrity (CFI).

The following challenges were encountered during development:

- Managing recursive calls to avoid infinite loops.
- Resolving computed calls, where targets are not directly visible during static analysis.
- Ensuring the accuracy of overestimation while minimizing false positives.
- Seamless integration of the plugin's output with DECAF.

B. Architecture of the Ghidra Plugin

The architecture of the Ghidra plugin is designed to bridge the gap between static analysis and runtime enforcement. The workflow comprises the following steps:

1) **Static Analysis**: The plugin analyzes the binary to identify direct calls, computed calls, and recursive function paths.
2) **Recursive Depth Tracing**: The plugin employs depth control mechanisms to trace all possible function calls up to a user-specified depth.
3) **Computed Call Handling and Overestimation**: For computed calls that cannot be statically resolved, the plugin overestimates possible targets using Ghidra's p-code operations.
4) **Integration with DECAF**: The control flow graphs (CFGs) generated by the plugin are fed into DECAF for runtime validation.

The architectural workflow is illustrated in Fig. 2.

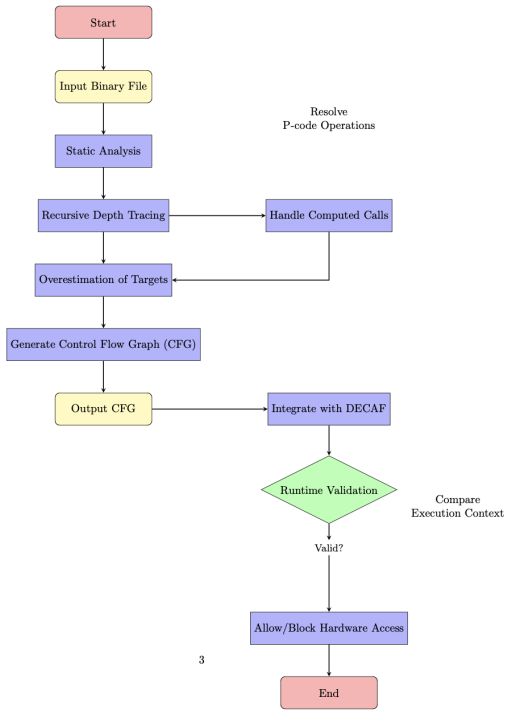

Fig. 2. Architecture of the Ghidra Plugin and its Integration.

C. Implementation Details

1) Static Analysis: The plugin begins by performing static analysis of the binary using Ghidra's analysis framework. It identifies:

- **Direct Calls**: Direct function calls are extracted from the control flow graph (CFG) using Ghidra's function manager and reference manager.
- **Computed Calls**: Indirect calls made via function pointers are resolved using Ghidra's p-code operations. When static resolution is not possible, the plugin overestimates potential targets.

Recursive depth control ensures that the analysis terminates after reaching a predefined depth, preventing infinite recursion.

2) Handling Computed Calls: Computed calls are analyzed using Ghidra's intermediate representation (p-code). The plugin identifies CALLIND operations in p-code instructions and attempts to resolve potential targets. For unresolved calls, the plugin overestimates targets using available references to function addresses.

3) Overestimation: Overestimation ensures that all possible call targets are accounted for when resolving computed calls. This is achieved by:

1) Logging all functions whose addresses are stored in memory as potential targets.
2) Including unresolved references as part of the overestimation output.

While this may result in a larger call graph, it guarantees that no valid paths are missed.

4) Integration with DECAF: The CFGs generated by the plugin are integrated with the DECAF runtime system. DECAF monitors the program's execution and compares the current call stack to the precomputed CFGs. If the execution context matches a valid path, access to critical hardware components is granted. Deviations from the CFG result in enforcement actions, such as restricting hardware access.

D. Features of the Ghidra Plugin

The key features of the Ghidra plugin include:

- **Recursive Tracing with Depth Control**: Prevents infinite loops while analyzing recursive calls.
- **Direct and Computed Call Analysis**: Differentiates between direct calls and computed calls.
- **Overestimation Handling**: Ensures unresolved computed calls are overestimated and logged.
- **Control Flow Graph Generation**: Produces detailed CFGs for target functions.
- **Seamless Integration with DECAF**: Enables runtime enforcement of control flow integrity.

IV. Code Overview

This section provides an in-depth explanation of the code developed for the Ghidra plugin. The code is divided into two main components: **Recursive Call Tracing** and **Plugin Implementation**. These components address key challenges in static analysis, such as handling computed calls, recursive tracing, and overestimation.

A. Recursive Call Tracing

Recursive calls pose a challenge for static analysis due to the risk of infinite loops. To address this, a depth control mechanism is implemented, ensuring that the analysis halts after reaching a predefined depth. Below is a simplified snippet of the recursive function that performs call tracing:

```
def trace_callers(function, depth=0):
    if max_depth > 0 and depth >= max_depth:
        return  # Stop recursion at max depth
    if function in visited_functions:
        return  # Avoid infinite recursion for already visited functions

    visited_functions.add(function)
    function_name = function.getName()
    print(f"{'  ' * depth}Function: {function_name} at depth {depth}")

    # Check if the function's address is taken (for overestimation)
    if is_address_taken(function):
        print(f"{'  ' * depth}Function: {function_name} has its address stored
              in memory.")

    # Get references to this function
    references = getReferencesTo(function.getEntryPoint())
    for ref in references:
        if ref.getReferenceType().isCall():
            calling_function = getFunctionContaining(ref.getFromAddress())
            if calling_function:
                print(f"{'  ' * (depth + 1)}Direct Call:
                      {calling_function.getName()} -> {function_name}")
                trace_callers(calling_function, depth + 1)
```

Listing 1. Recursive Call Tracing with Depth Control

Implementation Highlights:

- Maintains a `visited_functions` set to prevent revisiting already analyzed functions, avoiding infinite loops.
- Limits recursion depth using the `max_depth` parameter, balancing completeness and computational efficiency.
- Traces direct calls by analyzing references to the target function's entry point.

B. Plugin Implementation

The Ghidra plugin leverages the recursive tracing function to analyze control flows, identify direct and computed calls, and handle overestimation. Key portions of the plugin code are highlighted below.

1) Static Analysis: The static analysis phase identifies direct and computed calls within the program. The following code snippet demonstrates how the plugin separates valid edges from computed calls:

```
for function in function_manager.getFunctions(True):
    function_name = function.getName()
    valid_edges[function_name] = []
    computed_calls[function_name] = []

    # Iterate through instructions to identify call types
    instructions = listing.getInstructions(function.getBody(), True)
    for instruction in instructions:
        if instruction.getFlowType().isCall():
            if instruction.getFlowType().isComputed():
                # Handle computed calls
                possible_targets = resolve_computed_call(instruction)
                if possible_targets:
                    for target in possible_targets:
                        computed_calls[function_name].append(target)
                else:
                    computed_calls[function_name].append(
                        f"Unresolved_at_{instruction.getAddress()}"
                    )
            else:
                # Handle direct calls
                references = getReferencesFrom(instruction.getAddress())
                for ref in references:
                    if ref.getReferenceType().isUnconditional():
                        called_function = getFunctionAt(ref.getToAddress())
                        if called_function:
                            valid_edges[function_name].append(called_function.getName
```

Listing 2. Static Analysis for Direct and Computed Calls

Implementation Highlights:

- Identifies direct calls by analyzing `UNCONDITIONAL_CALL` references.
- Handles computed calls using `resolve_computed_call()` to analyze potential targets.
- Logs unresolved computed calls for further analysis and overestimation.

2) Overestimation Handling: Overestimation ensures that all potential call targets are considered, even when static resolution is impossible. Below is an excerpt illustrating overestimation:

```
def resolve_computed_call(instruction):
    targets = set()
    pcode_ops = instruction.getPcode()
    for op in pcode_ops:
        if op.getOpcode() == PcodeOp.CALLIND:
            # Analyze potential targets for computed calls
            possible_refs =
                  reference_manager.getReferencesFrom(instruction.getAddress())
            for ref in possible_refs:
                if ref.getReferenceType() == RefType.COMPUTED_CALL:
                    target_function = getFunctionAt(ref.getToAddress())
                    if target_function:
                        targets.add(target_function.getName())
    return targets
```

Listing 3. Overestimation for Computed Calls

3) Integration with DECAF: The final stage integrates the plugin with the DECAF framework. The plugin outputs control flow graphs (CFGs) that DECAF uses for runtime enforcement. Below is a simplified CFG generation snippet:

```
def generate_cfg(function):
    cfg = {}
    trace_callers(function, depth=0)
    cfg[function.getName()] = valid_edges[function.getName()]
    return cfg
```

Listing 4. Control Flow Graph Generation

Integration Highlights:

- Combines valid edges and overestimated targets to create a comprehensive CFG.
- Enables DECAF to validate the execution context of each function at runtime.

V. Results

The results of the Ghidra plugin demonstrate its capabilities in static control flow analysis, handling computed calls with overestimation, and recursive call tracing. This section showcases the outcomes obtained by running the plugin on a sample program, highlighting valid call edges, computed call overestimation, and recursive depth analysis.

A. Valid Call Graph

The plugin captures valid control flow edges in the target binary. These include direct function calls extracted during static analysis. The results, as shown in Figure 3, illustrate the relationships between different functions in the program.

```
Captured Function Call Graph - Valid Edges:
Function '__libc_csu_init' directly calls '_init'.
Function 'logMessage' directly calls 'strlen'.
Function 'logMessage' directly calls 'write'.
Function 'main' directly calls 'open'.
Function 'main' directly calls 'perror'.
Function 'main' directly calls 'readFile'.
Function 'main' directly calls 'saveResults'.
Function 'main' directly calls 'close'.
Function 'validateData' directly calls 'logMessage'.
Function 'validateData' directly calls 'finalize'.
Function 'frame_dummy' directly calls 'register_tm_clones'.
Function 'handleData' directly calls 'logMessage'.
Function 'handleData' directly calls 'validateData'.
Function 'filterData' directly calls 'logMessage'.
Function 'filterData' directly calls 'handleData'.
Function 'saveResults' directly calls 'logMessage'.
Function 'saveResults' directly calls 'cleanup'.
Function 'processData' directly calls 'logMessage'.
Function 'processData' directly calls 'filterData'.
Function 'logError' directly calls 'logMessage'.
Function 'logError' directly calls 'processData'.
Function 'cleanup' directly calls 'logMessage'.
Function 'cleanup' directly calls 'logError'.
Function '__do_global_dtors_aux' directly calls 'FUN_00101080'.
Function '__do_global_dtors_aux' directly calls 'deregister_tm_clones'.
Function 'readFile' directly calls 'logMessage'.
Function 'readFile' directly calls 'processData'.
Function 'finalize' directly calls 'logMessage'.
```

Fig. 3. Captured Function Call Graph - Valid Edges.

Explanation: - The valid edges represent the direct function calls where one function explicitly calls another. - For instance, the function `main` directly calls `open`, `perror`, `readFile`, `saveResults`, and `close`. - Similarly, other functions such as `logMessage` and `validateData` are traced to their respective call chains. - This information is crucial for constructing the static control flow graph (CFG) and validating execution paths.

B. Function Address Listing

The plugin generates a comprehensive list of all functions in the program, including their corresponding addresses. Figure 4 shows the output.

Explanation: - The list includes both user-defined and library functions. - For example, functions like `_start`, `readFile`, `logError`, and `validateData` are identified along with their corresponding memory addresses. - Such listings are useful for analyzing the binary structure and mapping function references.

C. Computed Call Overestimation

The plugin handles unresolved computed calls through overestimation, ensuring that all potential targets are considered. Figure 5 demonstrates the overestimation process.

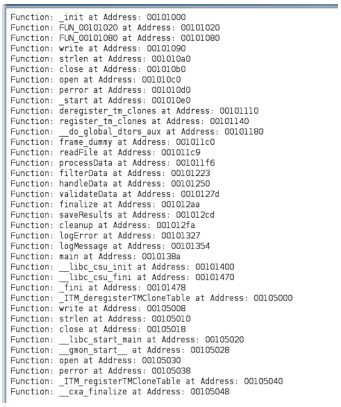

Fig. 4. Function Address Listing in the Program.

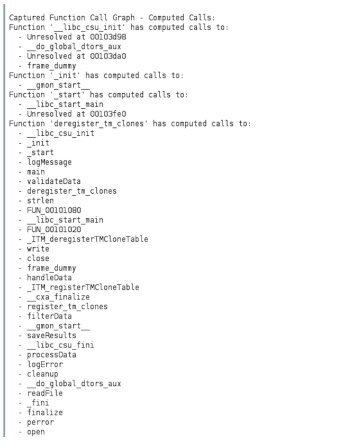

Fig. 5. Captured Function Call Graph - Computed Calls.

Explanation: - Computed calls introduce ambiguity in static analysis, especially when function pointers are used. - The plugin overestimates by logging all potential targets, as shown in the results. - For instance, the function `deregister_tm_clones` has computed calls to various targets such as `_init`, `logMessage`, and `validateData`. - This conservative approach ensures no valid path is missed.

D. Recursive Depth Tracing

Recursive calls are analyzed with depth control to prevent infinite loops and balance performance. Figure 6 highlights the recursive call tracing for the `main` function.

Explanation: - The trace starts with the `main` function and explores its call chain up to a predefined depth. - Direct calls (e.g., `main` to `readFile`) and their subsequent chains (e.g., `readFile` to `logMessage`, `logMessage` to `strlen`) are identified. - Computed calls are logged as unresolved targets with their addresses, as seen in functions like `close` and `write`. - This detailed output ensures that all recursive paths are analyzed without infinite recursion.

E. Summary of Results

The results demonstrate the plugin's effectiveness in:

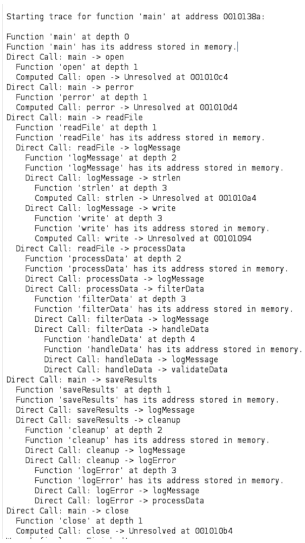

Fig. 6. Recursive Depth Tracing Results.

- Identifying valid control flow paths, including direct function calls.
- Handling computed calls through overestimation to capture unresolved targets.
- Tracing recursive call chains with depth control.
- Generating detailed control flow graphs for integration with DECAF.

The combined static analysis and runtime enforcement ensure that the program's control flow adheres to its intended behavior, thereby enhancing security against control flow attacks.

VI. Conclusion

This paper presents a Ghidra-based static analysis plugin integrated with the DECAF framework for runtime enforcement of Control Flow Integrity (CFI). The plugin effectively combines static analysis with dynamic introspection, ensuring robust protection against control flow hijacking attacks, such as Return-Oriented Programming (ROP) and Jump-Oriented Programming (JOP).

The key contributions of this work include:

- **Static Analysis of Control Flow**: The plugin identifies direct and computed calls, tracing recursive call chains with depth control to avoid infinite loops.
- **Handling Computed Calls and Overestimation**: By analyzing P-code operations, the plugin resolves computed calls where possible and applies overestimation to capture unresolved targets conservatively.
- **Control Flow Graph (CFG) Generation**: The plugin generates detailed CFGs, which are consumed by the DECAF runtime framework to validate execution contexts.
- **Runtime Enforcement**: DECAF compares the program's runtime call stack with precomputed CFGs, enabling or blocking hardware access based on validated execution paths.

The results demonstrate the plugin's ability to comprehensively analyze control flow, separating valid edges and computed calls while ensuring that critical paths are not missed. Recursive depth tracing, overestimation for unresolved calls, and CFG generation provide a solid foundation for runtime CFI enforcement.

Future Work

While the plugin performs well for the current test cases, several areas for improvement remain:

- **Dynamic Analysis Integration**: Combining the plugin with runtime monitoring tools to enhance the handling of self-modifying code and Just-In-Time (JIT) compiled binaries.
- **Optimization of Overestimation**: Reducing false positives introduced during overestimation to improve analysis precision.
- **Support for Complex Binaries**: Extending the plugin to handle larger and more complex programs, including multi-threaded applications.
- **Additional Security Policies**: Exploring the enforcement of additional security mechanisms using the DECAF runtime framework.

In conclusion, this work demonstrates the potential of integrating Ghidra's static analysis capabilities with DECAF's dynamic enforcement mechanism to secure hardware systems against advanced control flow attacks. The hybrid approach provides a strong balance between comprehensive analysis and efficient runtime validation, making it suitable for resource-constrained environments like embedded systems and IoT devices.

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