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### Privilege metric for evaluating the security of a library

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#### Abstract

A privilege metric application quantifies a privilege reduction for a subject software module M.sub.S. Target critical resources M.sub.t accessible by the subject module are identified. Permissions P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) for the subject module to access each of the target critical resources as a result of the privilege reduction are determined. Default library permissions P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) without the privilege reduction are determined. A metric regarding the vulnerability reduction of P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) with respect to P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) is quantified.

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## Background/Summary

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS (1) This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 63/273,912, filed Oct. 30, 2021, entitled “Privilege Metric for Evaluating the Security of a Library,” which is incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

### FIELD OF THE INVENTION

(1) The present invention relates to computer privacy, and more particularly, is related to evaluating security of library permissions in a software application.

### BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

(2) Computer applications use several dozens or even hundreds of libraries created by many different authors and accessed via public repositories. The heavy use of libraries is particularly common in JavaScript applications, and especially in those running on the Node.js platform, where developers have access to millions of libraries through a node package manager (npm). Reliance on libraries introduces the risk of dynamic compromise, i.e., the runtime exploitation of a benign library via library inputs, affecting the security of the entire application and its broader operating environment. For example, consider a (de)serialization library that uses JavaScript's built-in eval function to parse a string into a runtime object, as shown in Table 1.

(3) TABLE-US-00001 TABLE 1 Example of an application routine (left) calling a library deserialization function (right) let srv = (req, res) => { let lg = require(“log”); let slr, obj; lg.LVL = lg.levels.WARN; srl = require(“serial”); module.export = { obj = srl.dec(req.body): dec: (str) => { rout(obj, res); let obj: } lg.info(“srl:dec”); Obj = eval(str); let rout = (...) => {...} return obj }, enc: (obj) => {...} }

(4) Here, an off-the-shelf serialization implemented by a serial third-party module (Table 1, right column), is vulnerable to remote code execution by the calling routine (Table 1, left column). While the library itself is benign, accessing no other external API apart from eval, an attacker may pass a malicious serialized object to the deserialization function, where the deserialization function will in turn will pass malicious serialized object to eval. As a result, the library may be subverted

into malicious behavior, e.g., accessing the file system or the network, that goes far beyond what a (de)serialization library is intended to do. The underlying problem is that each library running on Node.js has all privileges offered by the JavaScript language and its runtime environment. In particular, each library is allowed to access any built-in API, global variables, APIs of other imported libraries, and even import additional libraries.

(5) FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram illustrating the full source code **100** of a computer application, including application specific code **110**, trusted libraries **120, 122, 124**, and third party (untrusted) libraries **130-134**. For example, the trusted libraries **120, 122, 124** may have been provided by the developer of the application specific code **110**, and may include an encryption library **120**, a hash library **122**, and a math library **124**. The application may also access third party libraries **130-134**, where the third party libraries may have vulnerabilities that may be exploited via the application interface. For example, the application developer may not be aware of known or unknown vulnerabilities, privileges, sensitive operations, and/or resource usage by the third party libraries **130-134**.

(6) Various methods may reduce the privileges of subject modules accessing critical resources. Such methods attempt to reduce the risk of dynamic compromise by specifying and enforcing the privilege available to libraries to permit a library to access only the functionality that it really needs. This prevents attackers from subverting library access into behavior that goes beyond its intended behavior.

(7) Any such method—whether created automatically or manually—on existing programs should preferably strike a balance between compatibility and security: an ideal policy would allow only the necessary accesses but no more. Unfortunately, statically inferring such an ideal policy in the context of any language is known to be undecidable, making it difficult to quantitatively evaluate the security benefits offered by such methods. Therefore, there is a need in the industry to address one or more of the above mentioned shortcomings.

## SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

(8) Embodiments of the present invention provide a method for determining a privilege metric for evaluating security of a library. Briefly described, the present invention is directed to a privilege metric application that quantifies a privilege reduction for a subject software module  $M.sub.S$ . Target critical resources  $M.sub.t$  accessible by the subject module are identified. Permissions  $P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$  for the subject module to access each of the target critical resources as a result of the privilege reduction are determined, and default library permissions  $P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$  without the privilege reduction are determined. A metric regarding the vulnerability reduction of  $P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$  with respect to  $P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$  is quantified.

(9) Other systems, methods and features of the present invention will be or become apparent to one having ordinary skill in the art upon examining the following drawings and detailed description. It is intended that all such additional systems, methods, and features be included in this description, be within the scope of the present invention and protected by the accompanying claims.

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## Description

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

(1) The accompanying drawings are included to provide a further understanding of the invention, and are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification. The components in the drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon clearly illustrating the principles of the present invention. The drawings illustrate embodiments of the invention and, together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention.

(2) FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram illustrating the full source code **100** of a computer application.

(3) FIG. 2 is a flowchart of an exemplary method embodiment for quantifying a privilege reduction

for a subject module.

(4) FIG. 3 is a block diagram for an exemplary embodiment of a system of a privilege metric application.

(5) FIG. 4 shows an example of a privilege reduction definition used by the system of FIG. 3.

(6) FIG. 5 is a schematic diagram illustrating an example of a system for executing functionality of the present invention.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION

(7) The following definitions are useful for interpreting terms applied to features of the embodiments disclosed herein, and are meant only to define elements within the disclosure.

(8) As used within this disclosure, a “library” refers to a collection of files, programs, routines, scripts, or functions that can be referenced in the programming code by a computer application. It should be noted the terms library, module, and package may be used interchangeably herein.

(9) As used within this disclosure, a “permission” is a property of an object, such as a file. It says which agents are permitted to use the object, and what they are permitted to do (read it, modify it, etc.). These are often referred to as RWX, where R stands for “read,” W stands for “write,” and X stands for “execute.” These may be summarized as follows: A read permission (R) grants clients the ability to read a value, including assigning it to variables and passing it around to other modules. A write permission (W) grants clients the ability to modify a value, and includes the ability to delete it. The modification will be visible by all modules that have read permissions over the original value. An execute permission (X) grants clients the ability to execute a value, provided that it points to an executable language construct, such as a function or a method. It includes the ability to invoke the value as a constructor (typically prefixed by new).

(10) The related term, “privilege” is a property of an agent, such as a user, and determines the access of the agent to specific objects, for example, based on the permissions of the object. A “privilege reduction” action reduces the number of, or types of agents granted permissions to access an object.

(11) As used within this disclosure, “library privilege (security) metric” refers to a ratio of interfaces available to the library. The metric may be used to calculate how much damage may be caused by misuse of the library. For example, given a car, with an API of 5 functions (accelerator, break, clutch, handbrake, steering wheel), if the driver only has permission to use two of the five functions (custom character, break, clutch, custom character, custom character), the amount of damage the driver could cause may be limited, here by reducing the likelihood the driver could crash the car if the only driver permitted actions involve lowering the speed. For this example, this is a ratio 2/5 privilege of a library/module, and (5-2)/5 privilege reduction metric.

(12) A “privilege reduction definition” refers to a ratio of interfaces allowed by a privilege reduction system over a full set of interfaces available to an application program.

(13) As used within this disclosure, a “whitelisted” agent or object is an agent or object that that full RWX privileges/permissions.

(14) Reference will now be made in detail to embodiments of the present invention, examples of which are illustrated in the accompanying drawings. Wherever possible, the same reference numbers are used in the drawings and the description to refer to the same or like parts.

(15) Exemplary embodiments of the present invention provide a metric to quantitatively evaluate the security benefits offered when analyzing privilege reduction methods. Described at a high level, the embodiments calculate single-library privilege reduction as the ratio of disallowed permissions over the full set of permissions available by default within the lexical scope of the library. The embodiments determine a default permission set by statically expanding all names available in scope. The disallowed set of permissions is calculated by subtracting the allowed permissions from the default permission set. Single-library privilege reductions across the full dependency tree are then combined into a single reduction metric for a program and its dependencies.

(16) A privilege reduction system produces a privilege reduction definition to reduce the vulnerability of a computer application to exploitation. The exemplary embodiments are configured to produce a metric to indicate the effectiveness of the privilege reduction definition without having to perform extensive testing of the privilege reduction definition.

(17) The following paragraphs describe the embodiments in detail. To assist in understanding the embodiments, the description refers to the third party deserialization library function of Table 1. One having ordinary skill in the art would appreciate that the following is provided for exemplary purposes and the present invention is not intended to be limited to this example.

(18) Under a first exemplary embodiment, a privilege metric application receives one or more subject modules  $M.sub.s$ , for quantifying their privilege. The privilege metric application further receives one or more target critical resources  $M.sub.t$  that may be potentially accessed by the subject modules.

(19) Assume that from the two modules presented in Table 1, only the privilege of the calling function main is to be quantified, thus,  $M.sub.s=\{main\}$ . The set of critical resources contains many paths available to main. For simplicity, now assume the paths only contains globals, fs, and require; thus,  $M.sub.t=\{globals, fs, require\}$ . Module main needs an X (execute) permission on require to be able to load serial, and an X permission on serial.dec to be able to call the dec function. With this simple configuration, the present system disallows all accesses except for  $P(M.sub.s, M.sub.t)=\{\text{custom character(require, X custom character, custom character serial.dec, X custom character)}\}$  (Eq. 1)

(20) The privilege metric application quantifies this privilege with respect to the permissions available to a library by default. If main was executed without additional protection, its privilege would be

$P.sub.base(M.sub.s, M.sub.t)=\{\text{custom characterglobals.*, RWX custom character, custom characterfs.read, RWX custom character, ...}\}$  (Eq. 2)

(21) More formally, by default, at runtime any module has complete privilege on all exports of any other module. Thus, for any modules  $m1, m2$  the baseline privilege that  $m1$  has on  $m2$  is:

$P.sub.base(m.sub.1, m.sub.2)=\{\text{custom character}\alpha, \mu \text{ custom character} | \alpha \in API.sub.m2, \mu \in Mode\}$  (Eq. 3)

where  $\mu \in Mode$  is a set of orthogonal permissions on a resource, which for the present system and method is  $P=\{R, W, X\}$ . The name  $\alpha$  can be any field that lies arbitrarily deeply within the values exported by another module.

(22) The privilege metric application reduces privilege by disallowing all but the whitelisted permissions at module boundaries:

$PS(m.sub.1, m.sub.2)=\{\text{custom character}\alpha, \mu \text{ custom character} | \alpha \in API.sub.m2, S \text{ gives } m.sub.1 \mu \text{ on } \alpha\}$  (Eq. 4)

(23) To calculate the privilege reduction across a program that contains several different modules, the privilege metric application compiles the privilege definition to a set of subject and target modules:

$P(M.sub.s, M.sub.t)=m.sub.1 \in M.sub.sm.sub.2 \in M.sub.t P(m.sub.1, m.sub.2)$  (Eq. 5)

Based on this, the privilege metric application defines the privilege reduction, a metric of the permissions restricted by a privilege-reducing system  $S$ , such as in the present system:

$PR(M.sub.s, M.sub.t)=\frac{|P.sub.base(M.sub.s, M.sub.t)|}{|P.sub.S(M.sub.s, M.sub.t)|}$  (Eq. 6)

(24) A higher reduction factor implies a smaller attack surface since the subjects are given privilege to a smaller portion of the available resources.  $P.sub.base$  is an under-approximation of base privileges, as a source module can, in principle, import and use any other module that is installed in the execution environment. Consequently, the measured privilege reduction is actually a lower bound of the privilege reduction that the privilege metric application achieves in practice.

(25) The routine main (Table 1) is not allowed to directly call eval; however, main can call eval indirectly by executing serial.dec. Accurately quantifying such transitive privilege involves

tracking transitive calls across such blockchains, which typically involves heavyweight information flow analysis. The privilege metric application privilege reduction quantification does not attempt such an analysis to keep runtime overheads low. As a result, estimate of the privilege metric application is necessarily conservative, that is, the privilege metric application reports a lower number than may be achieved in practice.

(26) FIG. 2 is a flowchart **200** of an exemplary method for a privilege metric application quantifying a privilege reduction for a subject module. It should be noted that any process descriptions or blocks in flowcharts should be understood as representing modules, segments, portions of code, or steps that include one or more instructions for implementing specific logical functions in the process, and alternative implementations are included within the scope of the present invention in which functions may be executed out of order from that shown or discussed, including substantially concurrently or in reverse order, depending on the functionality involved, as would be understood by those reasonably skilled in the art of the present invention.

(27) A plurality of target critical resources  $M.sub.t$  accessible by the subject module  $M.sub.S$ , is identified, as shown by block **210**. For a non-limiting example, libraries and resources identified in the header of source files of the subject module  $M.sub.S$  or otherwise included in the source files of the subject module  $M.sub.S$  may be compared against a predetermined list of critical resources and/or whitelisted resources. Libraries/resources not included as identified critical or whitelisted resources may be flagged for further investigation, for example, to determine whether they should be added to either the critical resources list or the whitelist. Permissions  $P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$  for the subject module to access each of the plurality of target critical resources as a result of the privilege reduction are determined, as shown by block **220**. For a non-limiting example, the permissions  $P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$  for the subject module may be checked against a predetermined list of permissions, or may be checked against present operating system permissions, for example, via executing a script. Similarly, default library permissions  $P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$  without the privilege reduction are determined, as shown by block **230**.  $P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$  is defined with respect to  $P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t)$ , as shown by block **240**.

(28) FIG. 3 is a block diagram for an exemplary embodiment of a system **300** for a privilege metric application **320**. A privilege reduction system **310** analyzes the privileges of software component and produces a privilege reduction definition **400** (see FIG. 4) that adjusts privileges/permissions in modules **350** of the source code **110** with respect to resources **330** in third party libraries **130** to reduce vulnerability to exploitation. The privilege metric application **320** may be a component of the privilege reduction system **310** or may be separate. The privilege metric application **320** receives the privilege reduction definition **400** and the privileges/permission of the subject modules **350** of the source code **110** and the target critical resources **330** of the third party libraries **130**. The privilege metric application **320** applies the method embodiment **200** (FIG. 2, described above) and produces a privilege reduction metric **380** according to the privilege reduction definition **400**. The privilege metric application **320** determines a baseline library privilege (security) metric to determine the security improvement represented by the privilege reduction definition **400**.

(29) One having ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that privilege metric application **320** may be performed by modules within a general computer system, server, or any system contain a memory and a processor. For exemplary purposes, FIG. 5 is a schematic diagram illustrating a system containing a memory that would have the modules described herein.

(30) The system **500** contains a processor **502**, a storage device **504**, a memory **506** having software **508** stored therein that defines the abovementioned functionality, input, and output (I/O) devices **510** (or peripherals), and a local bus, or local interface **512** allowing for communication within the system **500**. The local interface **512** can be, for example but not limited to, one or more buses or other wired or wireless connections, as is known in the art. The local interface **512** may have additional elements, which are omitted for simplicity, such as controllers, buffers (caches), drivers, repeaters, and receivers, to enable communications. Further, the local interface **512** may

include address, control, and/or data connections to enable appropriate communications among the aforementioned components.

(31) The processor **502** is a hardware device for executing software, particularly that stored in the memory **506**. The processor **502** can be any custom made or commercially available single core or multi-core processor, a central processing unit (CPU), an auxiliary processor among several processors associated with the present system **500**, a semiconductor based microprocessor (in the form of a microchip or chip set), a macroprocessor, or generally any device for executing software instructions.

(32) The memory **506** can include any one or combination of volatile memory elements (e.g., random access memory (RAM, such as DRAM, SRAM, SDRAM, etc.)) and nonvolatile memory elements (e.g., ROM, hard drive, tape, CDROM, etc.). Moreover, the memory **506** may incorporate electronic, magnetic, optical, and/or other types of storage media. Note that the memory **506** can have a distributed architecture, where various components are situated remotely from one another, but can be accessed by the processor **502**.

(33) The software **508** defines functionality performed by the system **500**, in accordance with the present invention, as described above with reference to the modules. The software **508** in the memory **506** may include one or more separate programs, each of which contains an ordered listing of executable instructions for implementing logical functions of the system **500**, as described below. The memory **506** may contain an operating system (O/S) **520**. The operating system essentially controls the execution of programs within the system **500** and provides scheduling, input-output control, file and data management, memory management, and communication control and related services.

(34) The I/O devices **510** may include input devices, for example but not limited to, a keyboard, mouse, scanner, microphone, etc. Furthermore, the I/O devices **510** may also include output devices, for example but not limited to, a printer, display, etc. Finally, the I/O devices **510** may further include devices that communicate via both inputs and outputs, for instance but not limited to, a modulator/demodulator (modem; for accessing another device, system, or network), a radio frequency (RF) or other transceiver, a telephonic interface, a bridge, a router, or other device.

(35) When the system **500** is in operation, the processor **502** is configured to execute the software **508** stored within the memory **506**, to communicate data to and from the memory **506**, and to generally control operations of the system **500** pursuant to the software **508**, as explained above. When the functionality of the system **500** is in operation, the processor **502** is configured to execute the software **508** stored within the memory **506**, to communicate data to and from the memory **506**, and to generally control operations of the system **500** pursuant to the software **508**. The operating system **520** is read by the processor **502**, perhaps buffered within the processor **502**, and then executed.

(36) When the system **500** is implemented in software **508**, it should be noted that instructions for implementing the system **500** can be stored on any computer-readable medium for use by or in connection with any computer-related device, system, or method. Such a computer-readable medium may, in some embodiments, correspond to either or both the memory **506** or the storage device **504**. In the context of this document, a computer-readable medium is an electronic, magnetic, optical, or other physical device or means that can contain or store a computer program for use by or in connection with a computer-related device, system, or method. Instructions for implementing the system can be embodied in any computer-readable medium for use by or in connection with the processor or other such instruction execution system, apparatus, or device. Although the processor **502** has been mentioned by way of example, such instruction execution system, apparatus, or device may, in some embodiments, be any computer-based system, processor-containing system, or other system that can fetch the instructions from the instruction execution system, apparatus, or device and execute the instructions. In the context of this document, a “computer-readable medium” can be any means that can store, communicate, propagate, or

transport the program for use by or in connection with the processor or other such instruction execution system, apparatus, or device.

(37) Such a computer-readable medium can be, for example but not limited to, an electronic, magnetic, optical, electromagnetic, infrared, or semiconductor system, apparatus, device, or propagation medium. More specific examples (a nonexhaustive list) of the computer-readable medium would include the following: an electrical connection (electronic) having one or more wires, a portable computer diskette (magnetic), a random access memory (RAM) (electronic), a read-only memory (ROM) (electronic), an erasable programmable read-only memory (EPROM, EEPROM, or Flash memory) (electronic), an optical fiber (optical), and a portable compact disc read-only memory (CDROM) (optical). Note that the computer-readable medium could even be paper or another suitable medium upon which the program is printed, as the program can be electronically captured, via for instance optical scanning of the paper or other medium, then compiled, interpreted, or otherwise processed in a suitable manner if necessary, and then stored in a computer memory.

(38) In an alternative embodiment, where the system **500** is implemented in hardware, the system **500** can be implemented with any or a combination of the following technologies, which are each well known in the art: a discrete logic circuit(s) having logic gates for implementing logic functions upon data signals, an application specific integrated circuit (ASIC) having appropriate combinational logic gates, a programmable gate array(s) (PGA), a field programmable gate array (FPGA), etc.

(39) It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various modifications and variations can be made to the structure of the present invention without departing from the scope or spirit of the invention. In view of the foregoing, it is intended that the present invention cover modifications and variations of this invention provided they fall within the scope of the following claims and their equivalents.

## Claims

1. A system for providing a privilege reduction metric quantifying a privilege reduction definition provided by a privilege reduction system for a subject module M.sub.S, comprising: program source code comprising a plurality of modules; a plurality of third party libraries; and a processor and a memory configured to store non-transitory instructions that, when executed by the processor, run a privilege metric application configured to: identify a plurality of target critical resources M.sub.t accessible by the subject module; determine permissions P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) for the subject module to access each of the plurality of target critical resources as a result of the privilege reduction; determine default library permissions P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) without the privilege reduction; and quantify a metric regarding the vulnerability reduction of P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) with respect to P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t).
2. The system of claim 1, wherein for the default library permissions any module has complete permissions on all exports of any other module.
3. The system of claim 1, wherein the run privilege application is further configured to disallow all but whitelisted permissions at boundaries of the subject module.
4. The system of claim 3, wherein the run privilege application is further configured to compile a privilege definition to a set of subject and target modules.
5. The system of claim 1, wherein the run privilege application is further configured to receive a definition of the privilege reduction.
6. The system of claim 5, wherein the privilege reduction comprises a metric of the permissions restricted by a privilege-reducing system.
7. A method by a computer based privilege metric application for quantifying a privilege reduction for a subject module M.sub.S, comprising the steps of: identifying a plurality of target critical



resources M.sub.t accessible by the subject module; determining permissions P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) for the subject module to access each of the plurality of target critical resources as a result of the privilege reduction; determining default library permissions P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) without the privilege reduction; and quantifying a metric regarding the vulnerability reduction of P(M.sub.S, M.sub.t) with respect to P.sub.base(M.sub.S, M.sub.t).

8. The method of claim 7, wherein for the default library permissions any module has complete permissions on all exports of any other module.

9. The method of claim 7, further comprising the step of disallowing all but whitelisted permissions at boundaries of the subject module.

10. The method of claim 9, further comprising the step of compiling a privilege definition for a set of subject and target modules.

11. The method of claim 7, further comprising the step of receiving a definition of the privilege reduction.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein the privilege reduction comprises a metric of the permissions restricted by a privilege-reducing system.

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