

Developing Secure Systems Individual Report

100203952 – Thomas McLoughlin
CMP-6045B

1 Introduction

This report will present research of the top cyber threats and vulnerabilities of modern systems with the aim of identifying methods to mitigate them.

2 Part 1

2.1 Account Enumeration

Account enumeration is the manipulation of a service's login function to determine the existence of a user. Attackers would determine this through two actions, first by inputting a username and password into the login and if a message is received stating that the password is wrong but not the username, then the attacker now knows that the username exists. The way to mitigate this manipulation is to return a generic message for a login failure not specifying whether the username or password is wrong, however this mitigation can be nullified using the second method where the attacker will try to log in and then compare the time taken to resolve the failed login. If the response was quick then the username doesn't exist, if the response took slightly longer then the service recognised the username and took longer to try and match the password. This manipulation can also be mitigated by applying a delay to the response when the username is wrong so that the attacker could not tell the difference between the two responses. The mitigation methods described above fit into a secure by design approach because they are concerned with the back end implementation details of the system and are obscured well from any attackers. These techniques have been represented as pseudocode in section A.1 of Appendix A.

Threat actors likely to use account enumeration are attackers of any kind that could range from casual programmers to criminal hackers trying to access various services. A likely attack vector for using attack enumeration would be if the attacker had gained access to a list of passwords for a service and was trying to find users to match to so that they could break into the system.

The interaction between the end users and the service will not be greatly affected by the implementation of these mitigations with respect to the improved security they provide, these mitigations do not affect the process of a successful login. The only problem that can arise with usability will be that if a user forgets their password or isn't sure what username they used for the service, the generic message not specifying which is wrong can be frustrating and make logging in more difficult.

2.2 Session Hijacking

Session hijacking is the utilisation of a lack of security given to website sessions where a user that has logged in creates a session with the web server so that they can make requests to the server without having to send log in details for every request. These sessions have an attached ID so that the web server knows which user it is communicating with, session hijacking refers to the multiple methods used to gain access to a session, usually by accessing the ID.

When attempting to gain access using the ID, one possibility could be that the site uses existent session ID's rather than generating a new ID for every session. This opens up the session for attack from session fixation where the attacker uses a known ID in a phishing email link to have

the user login and authenticate themselves then the attacker can hijack the session using the session ID (OWASP, 2020a).

There are multiple methods used to acquire session ID's to use for session fixation. Session sniffing, the use of packet sniffing software to intercept session packets and acquire the session ID attached to it, this can be done manually by the attacker or the attacker may use malware to automate the process. The attacker may also brute force the ID's by going through all possible permutations of the ID.

The threat actors likely to use session hijackers are the same as stated above in 2.1. The risk posed by these attacks are: the attackers would be able to gain access to a user authenticated login and perform any actions that the user would be able to within that session such as a money transfer, the attacker would also have access to any personal information that the session allows the user to view which may lead to ID theft, the attacker may encrypt valuable/vital data for ransom which could include intellectual property.

The main methods to mitigate session hijacking attacks include: making session ID's long and complex to avoid brute force access, make the site use a new session for each time a user logs in and give each new session a unique ID to stop access if a previously used ID has been compromised, ensure that a session is closed once a user logs out or if the session is not being used and times out and finally, all session data should be encrypted to prevent sniffing and malware attacks from accessing the session ID's. Another method of mitigation extraneous to any technical measures would include the training of end users to spot and avoid phishing emails.

Generating a unique ID with enough complexity to avoid ID guessing is very important. Therefore an example ID generation algorithm has been included as an acceptable method shown in section A.2. This algorithm was created using recommended practices from OWASP (2020b) such as ensuring the entropy number used is 64 bits to give an acceptable level of complexity.

The addition of any of the mentioned mitigations would have very little affect on the end users as the mitigations proposed are mainly secure by design techniques that are more concerned with backend interaction. Usability will not be sacrificed to a noticeable degree, the only affect on the user would be the requirement to always log back into the system once they leave as the session they previously used would have been closed.

2.3 SQL Injection

SQL Injection is the manipulation of sql queries to interact with a database in a way not intended by design, allowing the attacker to view, modify and delete data from the database. These malicious queries are manipulated using input fields such as the username and password inputs on a login page. If the login input fields take any value inputted and inserts that input into an sql query meant to retrieve user data, an example of which can be seen in section A.3 of appendix A. If the attacker inputs part of a valid query that will always evaluate to true, such as ' OR 1=1;–, then the example query will return all user data from the table. Depending on how much sensitive data is stored in the user table this could be a very dangerous breach, for example if passwords were also stored in the user table.

There are multiple methods of mitigation for sql injection that will be discussed below. Firstly is the use of prepared statements where instead of inserting input data into sql queries dynamically, the programmer defines all sql queries before-hand with inputs being parameterised. Any input then passed through to that query avoids executing an unintended query and will instead take the entire input as a string, for the example mentioned above using ' OR 1=1;– the query would merely search for a username matching the string ''' OR 1=1;–' (OWASP, 2020c).

Secondly the use of stored procedures which act in a similar way to prepared statements to avoid dynamic sql generation and instead parameterise and validate input. The difference between the

two is that stored procedures are sql queries stored in the database that are then retrieved by the application when needed. If implemented safely, avoiding the use of dynamic sql generation, then stored procedures can provide nearly the same protection as prepared statements. However a possible vulnerability of stored procedures compared to prepared statements would be in the case of a database requiring certain access levels such as read and write permissions to prevent certain use of the database. In the case of stored procedures, access to execute queries on the database is required meaning that if an attacker were to gain access to the database then they would have full execute privileges (OWASP, 2020c).

Another method would be the implementation of whitelist validation for certain parts of sql queries that cannot use bind variables as placeholders such as the names of tables or columns. In this case if a user inputted parameter is used to alter a queries target table or column then whitelist validation can be used to avoid the risks of sql injection. By mapping input values to a preset whitelist of possible choices for the target, the executed query avoids using the actual input from the user, an example is described in section A.4 of appendix A.

The mitigation methods discussed above would all be necessary inclusions in a secure by design approach as it would take considerable effort to convert a system to use these methods without a near full re-write of the related code. When trying to combat sql injection attacks, mitigation should be considered from step 1 and not be a reactionary change to a system.

The threat actors likely to use sql injection are again the same as those stated in 2.1. The main risk of sql injection is that an attacker could be able to execute any query they want on a database, in the case of a catastrophic breach, the attacker could delete tables containing important data.

End-users are unlikely to experience any adverse affects of the mitigation methods as all methods used to prevent sql injection are backend related, these mitigations would not affect usability of the system a noticeable amount to the common user. The only affect on the system will be the minor performance concerns.

2.4 Cross-site Scripting

Cross-site scripting refers to the various methods used to execute malicious javascript to access or steal information from a victim. There are 3 types of XSS, the first being "Stored". Stored cross-site scripting is the most damaging type of XSS where an attacker uses a website form, commonly on a website that allows public posts such as a social media site, to insert a malicious string into the websites database. This malicious string is now stored in the site, hence the name, and when a victim requests the compromised post, the website includes the malicious string in the response and sends it to the victim. The victims browser then executes the script inside the response. The script can be used for various functions but is commonly used to steal cookie data so that the attacker can then gain access to the site using the victims access, this is session hijacking as explained in section 2.2. This form of XSS is particularly dangerous as one insertion of malicious script can affect multiple victims due to the script having been stored in the website database and multiple victims may request that data.

The second type of XSS is reflected cross-site scripting which differs from stored by having the malicious script be sent to the victim first in the form of a link to a site. The attacker tricks the victim into clicking the link which sends the malicious script to the vulnerable site, the site takes the data from the request and adds the malicious script to the webpage where it then executes the script which could be used for the same uses as described above, commonly session hijacking.

The third type of XSS is done through manipulation of a websites document object model (DOM). The attacker constructs a URL containing the malicious script and sends it to the victim, the victim is tricked by the attacker into requesting the URL from a site that is vulnerable

to attack. The website receives the request, but instead of responding to the victim with the malicious script, the DOM of the website is manipulated to insert the malicious script into the website and then the victims browser executes it. This sends the victims cookies and sensitive data to the attacker allowing them to hijack their session or use the sensitive data for other means such as identity theft.

The first important method of mitigation for XSS relating to stored and reflected XSS is encoding website element content also known as escaping. If the attacker has inserted some malicious script into a post on a social media site for example. The site should check the string used for the post and character by character, encode any possibly malicious characters into a different format to avoid the script being seen and executed as javascript. For example the "< script >" section of the malicious string may be encoded in ASCII, so the '<' and '>' characters will be converted to < and > respectively. To avoid loss of content in the actual post, the html element used to display the content should then be set to use ASCII encoding . This will result in the script being shown as part of the post and the user may read it, but it will not be recognised as script and executed (IBM, 2020). Escaping for different expected characters is used when needed in certain contexts, the example described above is an HTML escape context, but it important to do the same for Javascript and others when needed. An example of how this encoding could be designed is shown in section 5 of appendix A.

Another method of mitigation for XSS is validation of user input. Any data received that originates from outside the system should be untrusted until validated. This validation could be done using a whitelist of known acceptable inputs depending on the context. Along with validating input any untrusted input should also be sanitised to remove unwanted data, depending on the context, including html tags and unsafe characters.

Mitigation for DOM cross-site scripting is more complex than for stored and reflected XSS. When inserting untrusted data into sections of the DOM you should run HTML and Javascript escaping before-hand as described above. However if the untrusted data is inserted into the Javascript section of the DOM then encoding it will not prevent it from being executed. A fundamental method of avoiding this issue is the use of a safe Javascript assignment property *textContent* and other safe content inserts, an example of which can be seen in section A.6 of appendix A. It is important to avoid the use of *innerHTML* as an output method and instead use *innerText* of *textContent* as explained above. This help prevent DOM based XSS vulnerabilities (OWASP, 2020d).

The mitigation techniques explained above are all important to a secure by design approach, handling of untrusted data that is received by a site is incredibly important to prevent manipulation of users access and personal information.

The likely threat actors to use cross-site scripting attacks are once again mostly the same as those stated in 2.1, however cross-site scripting is likely to be used more by those with an advanced understanding of hacking and website vulnerabilities. The common attack vectors for cross-site scripting require the tricking of the user to accessing a site through an attacker provided link, phishing emails being the most common delivery system. The consequences of a successful attack can range from minor to catastrophic, from simple redirection of the browser to cookie theft used for session hijacking, keylogging to steal personal information and credentials, fake login forms also for stealing credentials and using XSS to steal CSRF tokens that will be explained in the next section.

The end users can be affected by some of the mitigation techniques mentioned if not properly implemented. Encoding of scripts being sent to a site can prevent certain actions the site could make that may help usability. However the security benefits of avoiding XSS attacks are numerous.

2.5 Cross-site Request Forgery

3 Part 2

4 Conclusion

References

IBM (2020). <https://www.ibm.com/garage/method/practices/code/protect-from-cross-site-scripting/>.

OWASP (2020a). https://owasp.org/www-community/attacks/Session_fixation.

OWASP (2020b). https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/Session_Management_Cheat_Sheet.html.

OWASP (2020c). https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/SQL_Injection_Prevention_Cheat_Sheet.html.

OWASP (2020d). https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/DOM_based_XSS_Prevention_Cheat_Sheet.html.

A Appendix A

A.1 Account Enumeration Mitigation

Algorithm 1 $\text{login}(\text{username}, \text{password})$ **return** response

Require: username , the username for login

Require: password , the password for login

Require: users , the set of users and passwords that the system will compare the login against

Ensure: response , either a successful login or a response message

```
1:  $\text{Failure} \leftarrow$  "The username/password is incorrect"
2: for all  $\text{user}$  in  $\text{users}$  do
3:   if  $\text{username} = \text{user.username}$  then
4:     if  $\text{password} = \text{user.password}$  then
5:        $\text{response} \leftarrow \text{Success}$                                  $\triangleright$  Username and password correct
6:     else
7:        $\text{response} \leftarrow \text{Failure}$                                  $\triangleright$  Username correct, password incorrect
8:     end if
9:   else
10:     $\text{delay}$                                  $\triangleright$  Wait however long the check for the password would take
11:     $\text{response} \leftarrow \text{Failure}$                                  $\triangleright$  Username and password incorrect
12:   end if
13: end for
14: return  $\text{response}$ 
```

Figure 1: Example of a login with account enumeration mitigation included

A.2 Session ID Generation

Algorithm 2 generateUniqueSessionId() **return** *sessionId*

Require: *IdList*, the set of existing session Id's

Require: *prng*, pseudo random number generator

Ensure: *sessionId*, a unique session Id

```
1: entropy  $\leftarrow$  prng(64) ▷ Pseudo random number generation of length 64 bits
2: Id  $\leftarrow$  generateId() ▷ Generate complex Id
3: sessionId  $\leftarrow$  concatenate(Id, entropy)
4: if sessionId  $\in$  IdList then
5:   generateUniqueSessionId() ▷ Session Id isn't unique, generate a new Id
6: end if
7: return sessionId
```

Figure 2: Example of a random session Id generator using recommended practices from OWASP (2020b)

A.3 Basic User Retrieval SQL Query

```
SELECT * FROM Users WHERE username='' AND password='';
```

Figure 3: Example of a query that could be used to retrieve user data

A.4 Whitelist Validation Check

Algorithm 3 getTableName(*userInputValue*) **return** *outputTableName*

Require: *userInputValue*, the value for the table name inputted by the user

Require: *tableNameList*, list of valid table names

Ensure: *outputTableName*, the whitelisted chosen table name

```
1: for all name in tableNameList do
2:   if userInputValue = name then
3:     outputTableName = name
4:   end if
5: end for
6: return outputTableName ▷ if outputTableName returns empty then we know that the user input was invalid
```

Figure 4: Example of table name validation, an adapted example from OWASP (2020c)

A.5 External Script Character Escaping

Algorithm 4 `stringCharEscape(inputString)` **return** `encodedString`

Require: `inputString`, the inputted string (potentially malicious)

Require: `charEncodingList`, list of characters encoded values

Ensure: `encodedString`, the final encoded string

```
1: for all char in inputString do  
2:   if char.encode  $\in$  charEncodingList then  
3:     encodedString  $\leftarrow$  concatenate(encodedString, char.encode)  
4:   else  
5:     encodedString  $\leftarrow$  concatenate(encodedString, char)  
6:   end if  
7: end for  
8: return encodedString
```

Figure 5: Example of character escaping to encode a possibly malicious string

A.6 Use of `textContent` for Inserting Untrusted Data

```
<script>  
element.textContent = untrustedData; //does not execute code  
</script>
```

Figure 6: Example of using `textContent` to insert untrusted data safely into the DOM (OWASP, 2020d)