



Finding Security Issues in (Open Source) Software Repositories

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Declaration

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Abstract

In both proprietary and Free/Libre and Open Source Softwares (FLOSS) components, not all security vulnerabilities are documented in CVE format nor published in the vulnerability databases such as NVD. These vulnerabilities could have been fixed by the developers. Finding these vulnerability-fixing commits could provide valuable insights for the developers using those components. Therefore, the objective of this project is to develop a repository mining tool that is able to detect vulnerability-fixing commits using MSR approach. Comparing to previous approaches, the tool will be focusing on searches the commit message first, and then investigates the code difference in each commit.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) is a type of software whose license allows the users to inspect, use, change and redistribute the software's source code [20]. Since the introduction of the version control system, many repository hosting sites such as SourceForge [86], Google Code [34], and GitHub [32] have been launched. As a result, the participation of global communities into **FLOSS** projects have started to grow and different contributions were made to improve the software quality, which included fixing software vulnerabilities [26].

Building secure software is expensive, difficult, and time-consuming. It is necessary to know when and how a security vulnerability is fixed throughout the software lifecycle. Software components such as plugins and **application processing interfaces (APIs)** are usually developed by third-party developers and widely reused in both open source and closed source software [41]. An important factor of software security is determined by the information provided by the vendor of the software components for deciding whether to perform the security update. Hence, the users of software components are advised to check the **National Vulnerability Database (NVD)** [59] regularly for detailed information of the vulnerabilities identified in the software components used. Furthermore, it would be more helpful if the developers of

the software components recorded the list of changes or provide informative Git commit messages for every version update of their component.

To perform a risk assessment of a potentially vulnerable component, it is required to have a deep understanding of the vulnerability entry points. Yet, not all projects follow the **Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures (CVE)** format or publish **CVE**, and **CVE** reports are usually lack of technical details that attribute the specific entry points of the vulnerability, which is an important aspect in part of the risk assessment. By identifying the vulnerability-fixing commits, the vulnerable lines of code can be located, which allows the users to check if a vulnerable component is being used or not. However, some developers believe that public disclosure of security vulnerabilities patch is dangerous, thus vulnerability-fixing commits are not commonly identified and recorded specifically in some open source software repositories to prevent malicious exploits [9]. As a result, there is a practical difficulty in applying this analysis approach to find the security relevant commits that are not documented using **CVE** or a similar format, which are known as the silent patches.

To address these issues, a repository mining tool that investigates commit messages and identifies vulnerable software components can be developed to reduce the time and cost required to mitigate the vulnerabilities. The repository mining tool should be able to detect the silent patches through an advanced process, which the tool must analyse the source code changes between commits to locate the vulnerable lines of code. Moreover, the mining tool should be applicable to all types of software projects that are using Git as their version control system. Projects that are using a different version control system are also supported after they have been migrated to Git.

1.2 Objectives

- Identify the security patterns of the most popular security issues in **Open Web Application Security Project (OWASP) Top Ten Project**.

- Develop a repository mining tool to search through the commit history of a repository and find a list of commit messages that match the patterns. The list should be produced in **JavaScript Object Notation (JSON)** file format.
- Extend the mining tool which checks the code difference in the commits found to obtain the actual commits fixing the security vulnerabilities.
- Create a statistical tool that reads the output file and reports a detailed analysis of the results.

1.3 Challenges

This section is a brief summary of the main challenges that might occurred during the project. A more thorough analysis of the problems and constraints is carried out in **Section 3.5**.

- **Data:** There are a large number of open source repositories available on GitHub. However, it is challenging to find a set of sample repositories that can produce accurate and consistent results.
- **Misclassification:** The commit messages for the same vulnerability patch are not always the same, thus misclassification is inevitable. Using regular expressions to match the patterns in the mining process do not guarantee the correctness of the result.
- **Evaluation:** After mining a list of commits that contain the identified patterns in its message, the evaluation process might not correctly locate the lines of code that addressed the security vulnerability. It might be required to perform a manual evaluation to correctly identify some of the results.
- **Time:** Large repository such as Linux which has more than 820,000 commits in total [45] could be extremely time-consuming for the repository mining tool to complete the search and evaluation process.

1.4 Report Structure

Chapter 2 reviews a range of academic articles, theories, and previous studies that is related to this project, as well as investigating the techniques and tools to be used.

Chapter 3 is a list of detailed requirements and a thorough analysis of design, implementation and testing stage. Some core decisions are reviewed in the analysis part to ensure the feasibility of the project.

Chapter 4 is a comparison between different design concepts, where the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches are stated. The chosen design is justified with suitable diagrams provided including wireframes and UML component diagrams.

Chapter 5 describes the implementation process by highlighting novel aspects to the algorithms used. Testing is performed by following a suitable model to evaluate the implementation.

Chapter 6 presents all the results along with critical discussions about the main findings, and outlines the possible improvements that could be made in the future work.

Chapter 7 summarises the main points of previous chapters and emphasise the results found.

1.5 Relationship to Degree Programme

This project focuses on the research of real-world software security problems and offers valuable insights into computer security. By studying the patterns of security vulnerabilities patch in open source repositories, the practical knowledge for building and ensuring a secure system could be gained. Moreover, the difficulty of improving software security could be experienced during the evaluation process in this project. This relates to the Software Engineering degree as it requires a good understanding in version control system and it aims to improve softwares quality by reducing the time and effort needed to find security vulnerabilities in the source code.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter will start with the background contents of the project, and then focus on discussing the security aspect of open source softwares. Additionally, previous and existing relevant works are reviewed and a critical analysis is provided for the comparison of these resources and this project.

2.1 Open Source Security

The security of open source softwares mostly rely on the collaboration of the community. It is deduced that the power of open data and crowdsourcing will make open source security more reliable [37, 96], and provides more flexibility and freedom over the security option to their users [67]. However, when it comes to publishing the vulnerability information, it is suggested that the list of unconfirmed vulnerabilities should not be published publicly to protect the users from potential harms [82].

Arora, Nandkumar and Telang [35] have shown that vulnerabilities that are either secret or published but not patched attract fewer attacks than patched vulnerabilities. Although the research was conducted in 2006 and the results might be outdated, it still implies that developers might include a silent patch into some of the commits that is not explicitly recorded in the commit messages. It might be a rational approach for not disclosing the work attempted to fix a vulnerability, but other developers might not

be informed of the content change. Furthermore, if a similar vulnerability is discovered in the future, developers would need more effort for finding the previous solution. Therefore, it would be very useful for the developers if the mining tool developed in this project could detect the silent patches.

2.2 Taxonomy of Software Vulnerabilities

There are many software vulnerabilities being identified each year. By using a common vulnerability identifier system, vulnerability data can be shared across separate vulnerability databases to facilitate the interoperability of different tools. As this project focuses on finding security issues in open source repositories, it is necessary to discuss the industry-endorsed standard of software vulnerabilities categorisation.

2.2.1 Common Weakness Enumeration

The **Common Weakness Enumeration (CWE)** is a project launched by the Mitre Corporation and sponsored by the National Cyber Security Division of the United States Department of Homeland Security [22]. The **CWE** project organises the software weaknesses into a list of different categories, known as the **CWE** list. Software weaknesses are defined as errors that can lead to software vulnerabilities, which includes buffer overflows, authentication errors, code injection, etc. [23]. The **CWE** is now a formal standard for representing software weaknesses. Each entry in the **CWE** list contains detailed information about the specific weakness and is identified by a unique ID number.

2.2.2 Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures

The **Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures (CVE)** is another security project launched by the Mitre Corporation [24] to provide the community with a complete list of publicly known security vulnerabilities, known as the **CVE** entries. Each **CVE** entry is defined by an ID number, and includes a description followed by any relevant resources about the vulnerability. It

is now the standardised solution and industry-recognised standard for identifying vulnerabilities and exposures. However, developers and vendors are not required to publish security vulnerabilities of their projects **CVE** format. They are allowed to use their own naming scheme for the vulnerabilities, even if the same vulnerability has already been recorded in the **CVE** list.

2.3 Security Issues in Open Source Softwares

The **Open Web Application Security Project (OWASP)** is a worldwide non-profit organization committed to improve and raise the awareness of software security [65]. The project members of **OWASP** have worked together to produce a list of the most critical web application security risks based on the community feedback and comprehensive data contributed by different organizations. The list consists of ten categories of security attacks which are considered to be the most dangerous and popular in recent years. In **OWASP** Top Ten 2017 [66], one of the vulnerabilities that is closely related to this project is ‘Using Components with Known Vulnerabilities’, which will be extensively discussed.

2.3.1 Using Components with Known Vulnerabilities

It has been indicated that a small software component could create a large error in a software system [12, 55, 83]. Components such as plugins, libraries, and modules are ubiquitous in both open source and proprietary softwares. Third-party components are increasingly being integrated into softwares to reduce the amount of time and effort required for development [10], but they also increase the risk of vulnerabilities being introduced into the softwares. These components are mostly maintained by different developers or organisations, and the time required to fix a vulnerability varies between developers. While the majority of third-party components are still being actively maintained after a long time, some of them might have depreciated and security patches are no longer being released. The users might continue to use a depreciated component if they could not find a better alternative. However, using outdated components greatly increase the risk of software exploits. There-

fore, for any large-scale system, the developers must scan for vulnerabilities regularly and subscribe to the security news related to the components used to reduce the risk of security vulnerabilities being introduced into the system.

Vulnerable components can be found using methods ranging from dependency checking to machine learning. While this project is related to the former approach, the latter approach concentrates on finding the relationship between software errors and vulnerabilities to identify or predict high-risk components. Dependency checking is an approach of detecting dependencies (plugins, libraries, etc.) with known vulnerabilities in a software. Several open source tools including **OWASP** Dependency Check [64], Retire.js [77], and Safety [80] are applications that identifies vulnerable dependencies in a software project. Cadariu et al. [15] have used the **OWASP** Dependency Check tool to find all known vulnerabilities that have a unique **CVE** identifier in proprietary softwares written in Java. According to their study, the **OWASP** Dependency Check tool has low precision due to the high false positives rate in the large data sets. However, Cadariu et al. [15] justified that the tool is still usable by taking into account that the checking process is automated and any security issue found is considered a valuable information for the users.

Machine learning-based approaches are also applicable to find vulnerable components in a software system. Briand, Basili and Hetmanski [14] have developed a model with Optimised Set Reduction (OSR) algorithm that uses set theory, predicate logic, probability, and vector in the calculation. The model focused on identifying the components that are more likely to produce a large number of errors and it was proved to be effective, but the main drawbacks are the complexity of the implementation and the extensive calculations required. In comparison to Briand’s approach, Scandariato et al. [81] have built a model that uses text mining techniques to predict vulnerable components. While Briand’s model is capable of identifying high-risk components, Scandariato’s model is able to predict vulnerabilities in the future releases of a software components, and the results achieved are satisfactory.

As a conclusion, static dependency checking tools provide a fast and easy way to scan for vulnerable components, but the users are required to verify

the validity and compatibility of the results with their softwares. In contrast, models that use machine learning technique has been proved to be effective and are more likely to produce consistent and accurate results. However, such models require a large amount of training data and are only designed for a specific area. While dependency checking approach is more related to the scope of this project, the capability of predicting vulnerable software components through machine learning is a great way of preventing severe software errors. In future work, machine learning could be incorporated into the tool developed in this project to improve its overall effectiveness.

2.4 Mining Software Repositories

Mining Software Repositories (MSR) is a process of collecting and analysing data from repositories, which includes version control repositories, mailing list repositories, and bug tracking repositories. **MSR** applies to a wide range of fields such as business, research, and security [71]. The purpose of **MSR** is to extract practical information from rich metadata and discover hidden trends about a specific evolutionary characteristic [40]. The information collected could be used in various development process. For example, some developers could gain insight by mining repositories, which may help them to enhance their software quality based on previous implementation evidence of other developers [36]. While **MSR** have various usages in different areas, the primary objective of this project will be focusing on finding the security issues in open source software repositories through **MSR**.

In order to identify both hidden and publicly disclosed patches, it is required to make effective use of **MSR** technique. A **MSR** process is normally carried out using tools or scripts made by the researchers themselves. Although there are many types of research in the **MSR** field in recent years, the majority of the tools or scrips used are not published publicly [78]. As a result, it is not possible to fully replicate the previous research methods and make improvements based on that. Despite the undisclosed information of research methods in many papers, Shang [84] suggested that the **MSR** process should be split into several stages, with each stage focusing on a specific

topic of the problem to achieve the optimal efficiency.

2.4.1 Keywords Search

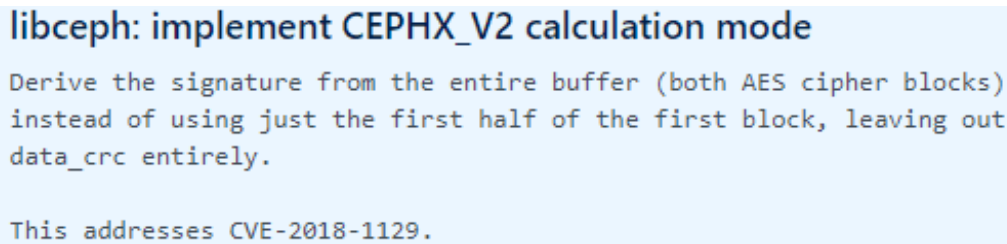
For many complex approaches, the keywords searching process is considered to be the fundamental step. If the initial results produced in the searching stage is good, a huge amount of effort could be reduced in the later stages. However, the prerequisite is that the repository must have a sufficient amount of valuable information, which can be estimated by judging the history of the repository. To correctly and precisely retrieve the information for a query, it is required to integrate some algorithms and modules into the search function. Matsushita, Sasaki, and Inoue [51] developed a repository search system that makes use of two functions: lexical analysis function and token comparing function. The system produced very detailed results by deploying recursive search strategy using the keywords found into every commit. On the contrary, Mockus and Votta [53] designed an automated program that makes use of normalisation, word frequency analysis, and keyword clustering techniques to search the commit messages. Although the program is able to retrieve the results that include the keywords, the algorithm is unable to identify similar terms or inconsistent form of wording for the commit messages.

2.4.2 Properties of Vulnerability-Fixing Commits

For every vulnerability identified in a repository, the vulnerability-fixing process that involves analysis, implementation, testing, and release will be executed [63]. Most of the vulnerability-fixing commits are pushed during the implementation and testing stage of the process. However, if the commit message of a fixing commit is ambiguous, it will be challenging for any tools to determine the correctness of the commit. In order to analyse the common features of the vulnerability-fixing commits, it is needed to find these commits in open source repositories first. By analysing the properties of vulnerability-fixing commits, it will ease the implementation of the repository mining tool and enhance the quality of the regular expressions used.

Meneely et al. [52] conducted a research to study the properties of

commits that introduce vulnerabilities, in which a reverse approach was used to find vulnerability-contributing commit by backtracking from the vulnerability-fixing commits. Meneely et al. identified the vulnerability-fixing commits by investigating into each vulnerability manually to find the respective fixing commit. However, the process of identifying vulnerability-fixing commit was not clearly explained by them, thus no constructive information about the properties of vulnerability-fixing commits is provided. On the contrary, Vásquez, Bavota and Velásquez [43] discovered that some vulnerability-fixing commits are grouped with other commits to address a vulnerability, which matches the assumption of Neuhaus and Plattner [56], and thus only part of the code committed is related to the vulnerability fix.



libceph: implement CEPHX_V2 calculation mode

Derive the signature from the entire buffer (both AES cipher blocks) instead of using just the first half of the first block, leaving out data_crc entirely.

This addresses CVE-2018-1129.

(a) Vulnerability fix in Linux kernel repository [44]



Merge pull request #360 from jehiah/csrf_validation_360

CSRF protection for OAuth flow.

(b) Vulnerability fix in oauth2 proxy repository [60]

Figure 2.1: A comparison of (a) a higher quality and (b) a lower quality vulnerability-fixing commit.

2.4.3 Finding Security Vulnerabilities

It has been reported that the descriptions and references in vulnerability databases are often lack of complete documentation [49], and vulnerability-fixing commit are not ubiquitous in every open source repository [92]. Finding a security vulnerability could be hard if the resources available are limited.

Having completed the researches on keywords searching techniques and properties of vulnerability-fixing commit, the approach for finding vulnerabilities can now be reviewed.

In this project, a static repository mining tool will be developed to find security vulnerabilities in open source repositories. Previous researches included the use of static software auditing and vulnerability mitigation tools to find bugs and vulnerabilities [19]. However, Bessey et al. [13] claimed that static tools have a negative effect on technical development due to its high false positives rate. While this statement might be true, it does not imply that all static tools are not effective as they differ in the techniques used in finding vulnerabilities [54]. Static tools usually require many experiments with different configurations to obtain the best result, and the result may vary across different data sets. This project differs from previous researches by aiming to find the security vulnerabilities through Git commit messages first, and then analyse the code changes in the commits. Researches have shown that vulnerability-fixing commits could be retrieved by extracting commit hashes from **CVE** references and gathering all commits that refer to a **CVE** number in its commit message [38], or by performing syntactic and semantic analysis on the commit messages [85]. To verify the validity of the commits retrieved, a screening test [27] can be performed to investigate the code changes in a commit against several criteria and identify the correct vulnerability-fixing commits.

This project extends prior work on Reis and Abreu's Secbench Mining Tool [75]. The tool aims to find vulnerabilities patch in GitHub repositories by using specific regular expressions for each vulnerability pattern. Then it creates a test case for every vulnerability found and these test cases are evaluated manually. Reis and Abreu [76] discussed the procedure of the evaluation and explained that human errors could occur due to source code complexity and similarity of vulnerability pattern. The approach of Secbench Mining Tool is similar to the concept of this project. However, performing manual evaluation on every result is not practical and it is proven that the use of automated algorithms can improve the detection process [47]. In this project, the tool developed should be able to automate the evaluation process

to some extent, while preserving the accuracy of the results.

2.4.4 Source Code Analysis

This section is an extension to **Section 2.4.3**. As this project involves in analysing the code changes in Git commits using static analysis methods, it is necessary to review the techniques used to identify vulnerabilities by source code analysis tools.

Finding vulnerabilities by source code analysis technique is relatively difficult than analysing commit messages as it requires a high-level understanding in both software vulnerabilities and the programming language of the source code. Source code analysis tools are generally designed for a specific task, and only support specific programming languages [3]. There are two types of analysis methods: static and dynamic. This project will mainly focus on studying static analysis, and comparing its advantages and disadvantages with dynamic analysis.

One of the advantages of static source code analysis tool is that it can analyse the code without executing it [46], but this could also be the drawback as it might generate more false positives than dynamic analysis. Static analysis is considered to be a promising method for detecting possible and obvious security vulnerabilities [28]. Zitser, Lippmann, and Leek [97] have developed a static code analysis tool to find buffer overflow vulnerability in C programming language code. Their approach requires manual definitions of the overflow patterns in their tool, which is considered to be a general method in static analysis.

2.5 Improving Software Security with Static Analysis and Repository Mining

The methods discussed in **Section 2.4** could be used in conjunction with static analysis tool to improve software security. As common static source code analysis tools can only take one version of source code as input, it is unable to find security vulnerabilities in previous version of the source code

unless it is specifically provided to the tool. Therefore, static analysis of source code could be integrated with **MSR** to find potential security vulnerabilities in older versions of the source code.

Researches have suggested that users often turn off auto-updates for softwares [30, 50] to avoid possible consequences such as major interface changes or compatibility issues. This statement is justifiable if and only if an update does not introduce security improvements bug fixes. As a result, it is helpful to run static analysis in an older version of software and inform the users about the potential security vulnerabilities if the users decided not to update the software. This can be done by traversing through the history of a given software repository and reports the issues found in each revision, the implementation details are further explained in .

2.6 Usage of the Repository Mining Tool in Other Areas

While the repository mining tool developed in this project is only capable of finding security issues through Git commits, it can be extended or modified to aid the researches in other areas. Some examples are briefly discussed in the subsections below.

2.6.1 Bugs Finding Model

Both Williams and Hollingsworth [95] and Ostrand and Weyuker [62] utilised **MSR** technique in their bugs finding model. Williams and Hollingsworth mined the code changes in each commit to find possible bugs, while Ostrand and Weyuker mined the most frequently modified files between version releases to predict the bugs-prone files.

2.6.2 Machine Learning Model for Automated Vulnerability Prediction

In comparison to the static approach used in the mining tool, machine learning technique could be introduced to achieve higher reliability and accuracy on the result. Nguyen and Tran [57] and Perl et al. [70] have built their machine learning model with dependency graph and vulnerability-contributing commit as their main approach respectively, while Li et al. [42] and Russell et al. [79] used source code analysis method in their machine learning model. According to their researches, machine learning models are able to produce relatively high accuracy results.

Chapter 3

Requirements and Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to express the aims in details and discuss the problems to be solved. This chapter will outline the requirements of the project and list the criteria to be met. The analysis part will cover every aspect of the design, implementation, and testing stage to ensure that the project is feasible.

3.1 Project Objectives

Initially, the objectives set in **Section 1.2** are an ideal concept of this project. Having completed the background research and literature review, it is now possible to provide a detailed description and more clearly defined objectives that improve the feasibility of this project.

1. **Vulnerability patterns:** The term ‘vulnerability pattern’ is used to represent the commit message pattern of different vulnerabilities. Correctly identifying the regular expression of each vulnerability pattern is time-consuming, and it would also need considerable refinement throughout the whole project. Hence, it might be more appropriate to reuse and improve the patterns provided in previous related works.
2. **Mining the commits:** This task involves creating a repository mining tool that makes extensive use of the pre-defined regular expressions to

search for the relevant commits. It is necessary to consider how closely a commit needs to match with the patterns for it to be included in the result. The file format for storing the results is **JSON**, and reasons are justified in **Section 3.3.3**.

3. **Evaluating the mined commits:** The mining tool can be extended to include a separate function that evaluates the commits mined to find the actual code commit addressing the security vulnerabilities. This project will consider to automate the evaluation process to some extent while maintaining the accuracy of the results at the standard level.

3.2 Software Requirements and Scope

3.2.1 Functional Requirements

Criteria	Importance
Compatibility: The mining tool should be able to run on all machines that meet the system requirements.	Essential
Completeness: The mining tool should be able to find all relevant commits of security vulnerabilities based on the regular expressions.	Essential
Informative: The statistical tool should return a complete analysis of the results.	Essential
Repeatable: The results should be repeatable and reproducible.	Essential
Scalability: The mining tool should be able to work on different project sizes, provided that the repository contains a certain amount of information.	Essential
Automated Evaluation: The process of classifying and evaluating the commits into different vulnerabilities patch should be automated to a certain extent.	Desirable
Extensibility: New vulnerability patterns and programming languages should be easily added into the tool.	Desirable

Robustness: The mining tool should be able to handle all possible errors without terminating the mining process.	Desirable
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Table 3.1: Functional requirements of the mining tool.

3.2.2 Non-functional Requirements

Criteria	Importance
Code Style: The source code should be well-commented and follow a consistent coding style.	Essential
Documentation: Installation and user manual should be provided.	Essential
Lightweight: The mining tool should have minimal dependencies.	Essential
Open source: As the mining tool is built for researching open source repositories, it should be open source to suit the use cases.	Essential
Performance: The performance of the mining tool should be optimised for different project sizes.	Desirable

Table 3.2: Non-functional requirements of the mining tool.

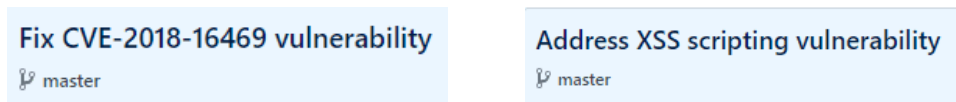
3.2.3 Scope

In addition to **Table 3.1** and **Table 3.2**, several fundamental requirements can be included to define the scope of the mining tool.

- **Language in Commit Messages:** The mining tool will only search for commit messages that are written in English.
- **Programming Language:** The source code analysis function in the mining tool will only support C, C++, Python 3, and other programming languages that have their rule set defined using the .
- **Repository type:** The mining tool will only support Git repositories.

Hence, repositories using other version control systems such will have to convert to Git first before using the mining tool.

- **Vulnerability type:** It is aimed that the mining tool should be able to detect **CVE**-identified vulnerabilities that have been fixed and recorded in the commit message **Figure 3.1 (a)**, and vulnerabilities that are not identified in **CVE** but recorded in the commit messages **Figure 3.1 (b)**.



(a) **CVE**-identified vulnerability fix [25] (b) Common vulnerability fix [18]

Figure 3.1: An example of (a) a **CVE**-identified vulnerability fix and (b) a common vulnerability fix.

3.3 Analysis

The aim of this section is to contemplate the options available for this project and review some of the fundamental decisions to be made before the implementation.

3.3.1 Programming Language

Python 3 [93] is chosen to be the main programming language for the repository mining tool. While other programming languages may be more suitable for tackling specific problems of this project, Python 3 provides sufficient coverage over every aspect with its comprehensive functionality. The greatest advantage of Python 3 is that it has a wide range of libraries that facilitate the development environment, which fully justified that a complete working solution can be produced using Python 3.

3.3.2 Libraries and Tools

The Python 3 standard library contains a wide range of built-in modules and extensive facilities. Moreover, many community created tools can be integrated into Python programs with minimal configurations as well. Below is a list of tools and modules that will be used in the mining tool:

- GitPython is a Python library built to interact with Git repositories [33].
- PyDriller [87, 88] is a Python library built on top of GitPython with additional features for repository mining.
- Flawfinder [94] is a program written in Python that is designed to find potential security vulnerabilities in C/C++ source code.
- Bandit [11] is a tool created by the Python Code Quality Authority to find security issues in Python source code.
- graudit [48] is a simple source code auditing tool that finds potential security vulnerabilities in source code using regular expression searches.

3.3.3 File Format of Result

The **JavaScript Object Notation (JSON)** [39] has been chosen as the file format for storing the results in this project. This is because **JSON** is supported in Python and it does not require complicated operations in Python to access the data. While various alternative data interchange formats such as the **Extensible Markup Language (XML)** [29] has its unique advantages, it is important to choose a data interchange format that consumes less resource and have lower processing time for a large amount of data. Since it has been proved that **JSON** has better performance than **XML** in terms of processing time and resource utilisation [58], it is considered that **JSON** would be the best option for this project.

3.4 Proposed Method

This project strongly emphasises the need for finding security issues in open source repositories by mining software repositories. While it might be impossible to discover the security patches in a repository through a single search, the problem could be solved using divide and conquer. The ideal concept of this project is to build a command-line interface program that is able to run two separate processes:

1. **Analysis:** This process takes a Git repository as input, then searches through the commit history and stores the list of potential vulnerability-fixing commits in a **JSON** file.
2. **Evaluation:** The evaluation process takes a **JSON** file as input, and present the results in an information way.

3.5 Problems and Constraints

As mentioned in **Section 1.3**, the main challenges of this project are data, misclassification, evaluation and time. The subsequent challenge is the implementation difficulties, which the severity is dependent on the complexity of the problems and the resources available. It is also expected that some problems might not be solved and new problems could emerge in the course of the project. This section will discuss the problems in detail and review several ways of mitigating them, as well as analysing the possible constraints that might affect the progress of the project.

3.5.1 Quality of Commit Messages

Although there are a lot of open source repositories available online, the majority of them does not have a formal guideline for the documenting the changes in the commit messages. As part of the **data** problem, the commit messages in the real-world repositories (**Section 3.7.1**) might have lower quality compared to a self-created repository. It has been reported that the terms ‘fix’, ‘add’, and ‘test’ have the top average term frequency in the commit messages [1]. With these indistinct terms being widely used in

the commit messages, the performance of the tool may drop on real-world repository test sets and it would require extra effort for finding the relevant vulnerability-fixing commits.

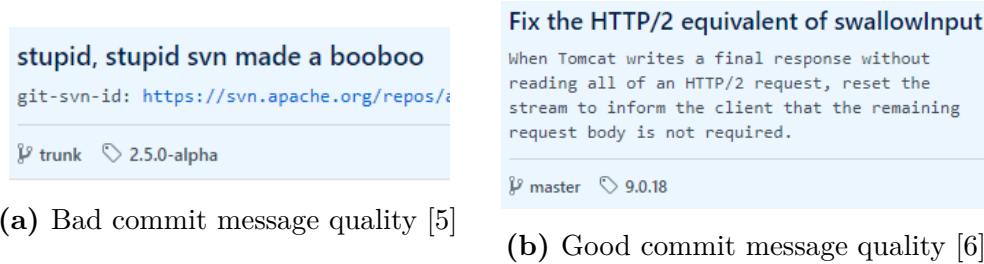


Figure 3.2: An example of (a) a bad quality commit message and (b) a good quality commit message.

Figure 3.2 shows a comparison between a bad quality and a good quality commit message. It should be noted that the commit message quality vary across different repositories and different authors. In real-world scenario, repositories that belong to organisations generally have a set of guidelines for documenting commit message. Such repositories would normally have higher quality commit message and are more likely to include valuable information in the commit messages too.

3.5.2 Results Evaluation Process

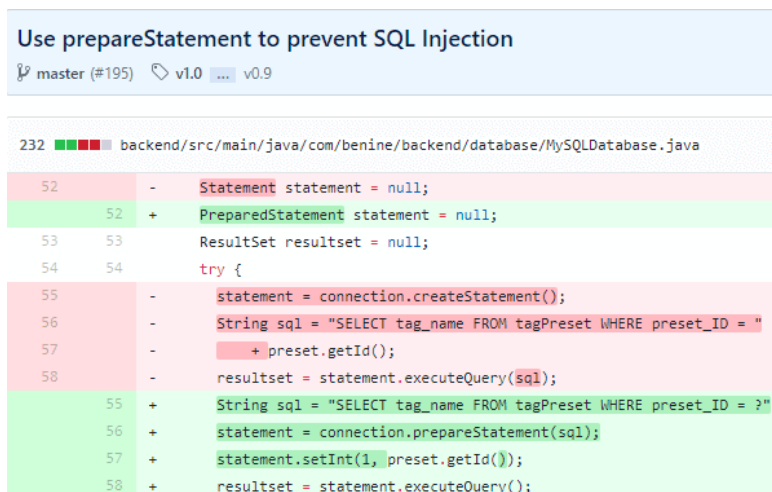
It is estimated that the **evaluation** process would be the biggest challenge of this project since it was regarded as a complicated and difficult area in previous researches. Moreover, this project plans to implement an automated version of the evaluation process, which will further increase the difficulty level. The implementation of automated evaluation is hard and it does not guarantee to provide a good result. It is also extremely challenging for the mining tool to work across repositories programmed in different programming languages. The constraint is that the tool has to be exhaustively tested to find the optimal threshold value and for it to be automated and produce good results. Although the tool might produce good results on some repositories, it does not indicate that the tool will produce consistent results on

all repositories. To ensure the minimum quality of the results, one of the solutions might be using both automated method for basic filtering and a manual method for advance refinement.

3.5.3 Code Changes Analysis

As discussed in **Section 3.5.1**, the commit messages in real-world repositories will contain noise and inconsistency that might affect the results retrieved. Therefore, it is expected that the results will contain a certain amount of false positive commits. By analysing the code changes of the commits retrieved, the validity of a commit can be verified by finding the changes for vulnerable lines of code, as shown in **Figure 3.3**.

However, the step of correctly identifying the vulnerable lines of code is challenging as it varies with different programming languages. Firstly, different programming languages have different code syntax, and thus the code changes for addressing the same vulnerability might be different across different programming language. Secondly, the code changes of a commit only represent a small fragment of the whole source code, and there might be several code changes in different files that are addressing a same vulnerability. Simple source code analysis technique might not be sufficient to find the relationship between code changes in different files.



The screenshot shows a code diff for a file named `MySQLDatabase.java`. The title of the diff is "Use preparedStatement to prevent SQL Injection". The diff shows changes between version `v1.0` and `v0.9`. The changes are as follows:

```

232 backend/src/main/java/com/benine/backend/database/MySQLDatabase.java

52 - Statement statement = null;
52 + PreparedStatement statement = null;
53   ResultSet resultSet = null;
54   try {
55 -     statement = connection.createStatement();
56 -     String sql = "SELECT tag_name FROM tagPreset WHERE preset_ID = "
57 -     + preset.getId();
58 -     resultSet = statement.executeQuery(sql);
55 + String sql = "SELECT tag_name FROM tagPreset WHERE preset_ID = ?";
56 + statement = connection.prepareStatement(sql);
57 + statement.setInt(1, preset.getId());
58 + resultSet = statement.executeQuery();

```

Figure 3.3: An example of code changes to prevent SQL injection [31].

3.6 Testing

This section covers a brief overview of the testing stage. It will be necessary to consider some of the self-created test cases and scenarios in advance to find all possible bugs and flaws.

3.6.1 Unit Testing

Python provides a unit testing framework as part of its standard library, known as unittest [91], which offers a complete set of functions suffice to cover the unit testing of this project. Fundamental test cases include checking the functions for an expected result. Additional test cases are based on the functionality of the tool to cover every feature implemented.

Test Case #	Test Data	Expected Result	Actual Result	Status

Table 3.3: Documentation format of the unit testing.

3.6.2 System Testing

After completing the unit testing, the mining tool has to be tested for its functional requirements, as mentioned in **Table 3.1**. It is expected that the program would not be able to handle complicated errors during the early implementation, and the project schedule would become an iterative process between implementation and testing. It is assumed that the testing stage would be the most time-consuming process in the whole project, thus it might be required to allocate more time and effort into this stage.

3.7 Evaluation

This section briefly discusses the approach to evaluate the mining tool on the real world projects to ensure that the requirements and criteria listed are practical and feasible.

3.7.1 Real-world Projects Evaluation

Real-world projects generally contain noise in their data due to inconsistency, incompleteness, and ambiguity [2], as shown in **Figure 2.1** and discussed in **Section 2.4.3**. Evaluating the mining tool on several real-world projects will test its ability of handling the noisy data. For the mining tool to be beneficial to the public, it must be able to produce results with a certain standard. This could be validated by verifying the accuracy and relevance of the results. It is presumed that the mining tool would only be suitable for a small set of repositories, and it might require comprehensive experiments of different configurations to achieve the best result.

Real-world projects including the Linux kernel [45], Apache HTTP Server [4], Apache Tomcat [7], Curl [21], OpenSSL [61], and Python programming language [74] are a good starting point for this project as they all have a large number of commits. This approach is reasonable as larger repositories are more likely to contain vulnerability- fixing commits and have a higher standard or informative commit messages.

3.7.2 Quality Evaluation

Having completed the testing stage does not infer that the repository mining tool would be practical in a real-world usage. To ensure the feasibility of this project, the tool has to be assessed by defining and measuring the quality metrics listed below:

- **Relevance:** The measurement of the number of relevant commits retrieved when given a regular expression that represent the commit message pattern of a vulnerability.
- **True positive rate:** The proportion of actual vulnerable commits or code being reported as a vulnerability.
- **False negative rate:** The proportion of vulnerable commits or code **not** being reported as a vulnerability.
- **Efficiency:** The total time taken required for the tool to complete the seaching process.

3.8 Ethical Issues

In this project, it is declared that any known or unknown vulnerabilities found by the mining tool in any repositories will not be publicly disclosed without the permission of the original authors. The reason is that publishing the vulnerabilities publicly would make the softwares highly vulnerable to attackers [8], and it is recommended to wait for the official announcement from the software vendors.

Chapter 4

Design

This chapter outlines the design concepts and justifies any decisions and approaches taken for the development of the project.

4.1 Programming Practices

To meet both functional and non-functional requirements defined in **Section 3.2**, a set of good practices has been adopted.

- **Performance:** Analysing large repositories can be time consuming. Therefore, the code should be written in a performance oriented style by following the advice of the Python Wiki [69]
- **Reliability:** Exception errors might occur during the runtime of the repository mining tool. Hence, exceptions should be handled in the code to ensure that the program continues to run when it encounters an error.
- **Simplification:** The coding logic should be clear and easy to follow. Large functions should be split into multiple sub-functions to improve code maintainability.
- **Documentation:** The code should be well documented and follow the PEP8 [68] coding style.

4.2 Implementation Model

There are several methods to implement the repository mining tool, and the selected approach must maximises the usability, while satisfying the requirements stated in **Section 3.2**. In this section, all approaches will be discussed and evaluated, with the selected approach further justified.

4.2.1 Considered implementation models

Model 1: Graphical User Interface (GUI)

The first model suggests implementing the repository mining tool with graphical user interface using libraries such as tkinter [90] or PyQt [73]. The interface can be divided into two parts:

1. **Repository Analysis:** This interface allows the users to open, view, and analyse the selected repository with specified parameters. During the analysis process, progress will be shown on the interface, and users are able to pause or stop the process.
2. **Statistical Evaluation:** This interface allows the users to read and edit the result file. Assuming the system has enough computing power and memory, the interface would allow reading and editing the result file concurrently with the analysis process. In this interface, users can browse through the results file and evaluate the results manually by marking the issues as false positive.

This model has several advantages, including better results presentation, multitasking ability on the same interface window, and easier result evaluation. However, the disadvantages includes the increased usage of system resources and incompatibility for batch job processing on the **High Performance Computing (HPC)** of the University of Sheffield.

Model 2: Executable Python Script

The second model suggests implementing the repository mining tool as an executable Python script. The tool does not have its own interface. It

must be executed in a **Command-line Interface (CLI)** such as a terminal, console, or shell. This model will divide the tool into two Python files:

1. **Repository Analysis:** This executable Python script file is responsible for analysing the repositories. It will accept user specified options via arguments, and perform the analysis on the command-line interface. Progress will be shown but the users are not able to pause the process. A **JSON** result file will be created when the analysis process has completed successfully.
2. **Statistical Evaluation:** This executable Python script file is responsible for analysing the result file. The script could be customised by the user to filter the results. The statistics is written to the **Standard Output (stdout)**, which defaults to the user's screen in the terminal.

In comparison with **Model 1**, this model features a lightweight and simplistic approach with all the core functionalities included. Running the tool as an executable script file uses less system resources and supports batch job processing on the **HPC** of the University of Sheffield. However, the users are not able to evaluate false positive results directly with the tool.

4.2.2 Chosen implementation model

After further consideration of both the software requirements and project objectives, **Model 2** was chosen to be the final implementation model. The reasons are justified below:

- Although new users generally find **GUI** to be visually intuitive, the tool itself does not require complex commands to operate. Moreover, the target users of the repository mining tool are researchers interested in the computer security field, which could be assumed to have basic knowledge of command line commands.
- Considering the time frame available for this project, creating a fully functional and visually attractive **GUI** might not be feasible. It would be more practical to allocate more time into improving the tool instead.
- The tool can analyse multiple repositories in a single command by

executing it in a shell script. This implies that the repositories analysis process could be divided into multiple parts and submitted to **HPC** for batch processing.

- Executing the Python script on a **CLI** uses less system resources than running a **GUI**.

4.3 Supported Programming Languages

Many open source repositories are written in more than one programming language. Therefore, the repository mining tool must be extensible and able to support multiple programming languages. The tool is predefined to support the repositories written in the following language:

- C/C++ (based on Flawfinder [94])
- Java (adapted and modified from graudit [48])
- Python (based on bandit [11])

In addition, the tool could be extended by the user to support other programming languages. The user must provide:

1. A rule set. This is a dictionary of common vulnerabilities. Each vulnerability are given a severity and confidence level.
2. A list of file extensions used by the programming language.
3. An optional regular expression pattern for non-context lines. A non-context line can be defined as a line of code that does not have positive contribution to the vulnerability analysis. Examples are code comments, blank line, and print statements for debugging purposes.

User-defined languages are expected to generate noisy results. This is because the tool does not understand the syntax and semantics of the code, thus it could not perform any control flow or data flow analysis. The generated results only give an indication of the possible vulnerabilities, it has to be reviewed and evaluated manually.

4.4 Overview of the Repository Mining Tool

4.4.1 Structure

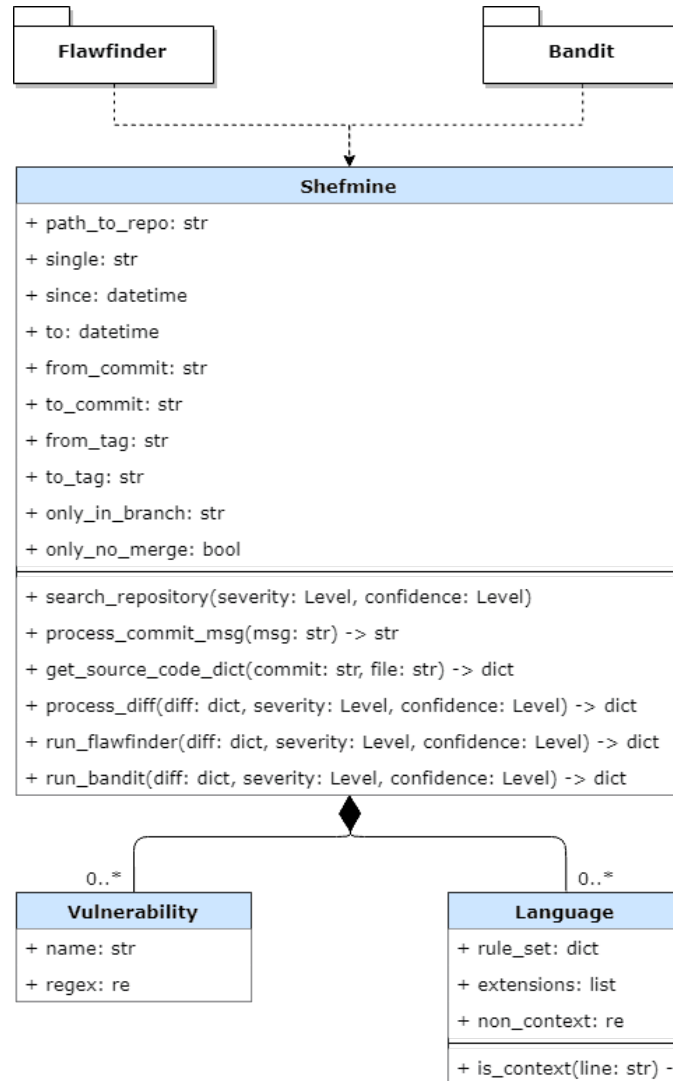


Figure 4.1: UML class diagram of Shefmine, the repository mining tool.

Figure 4.1 is a class diagram of the repository mining tool designed based on the requirements. The tool itself does not involve complex class relationships. Flawfinder and Bandit are external module dependencies, where the tool makes use of their analysis techniques to identify possible vulnerabilities.

4.4.2 Program Flow

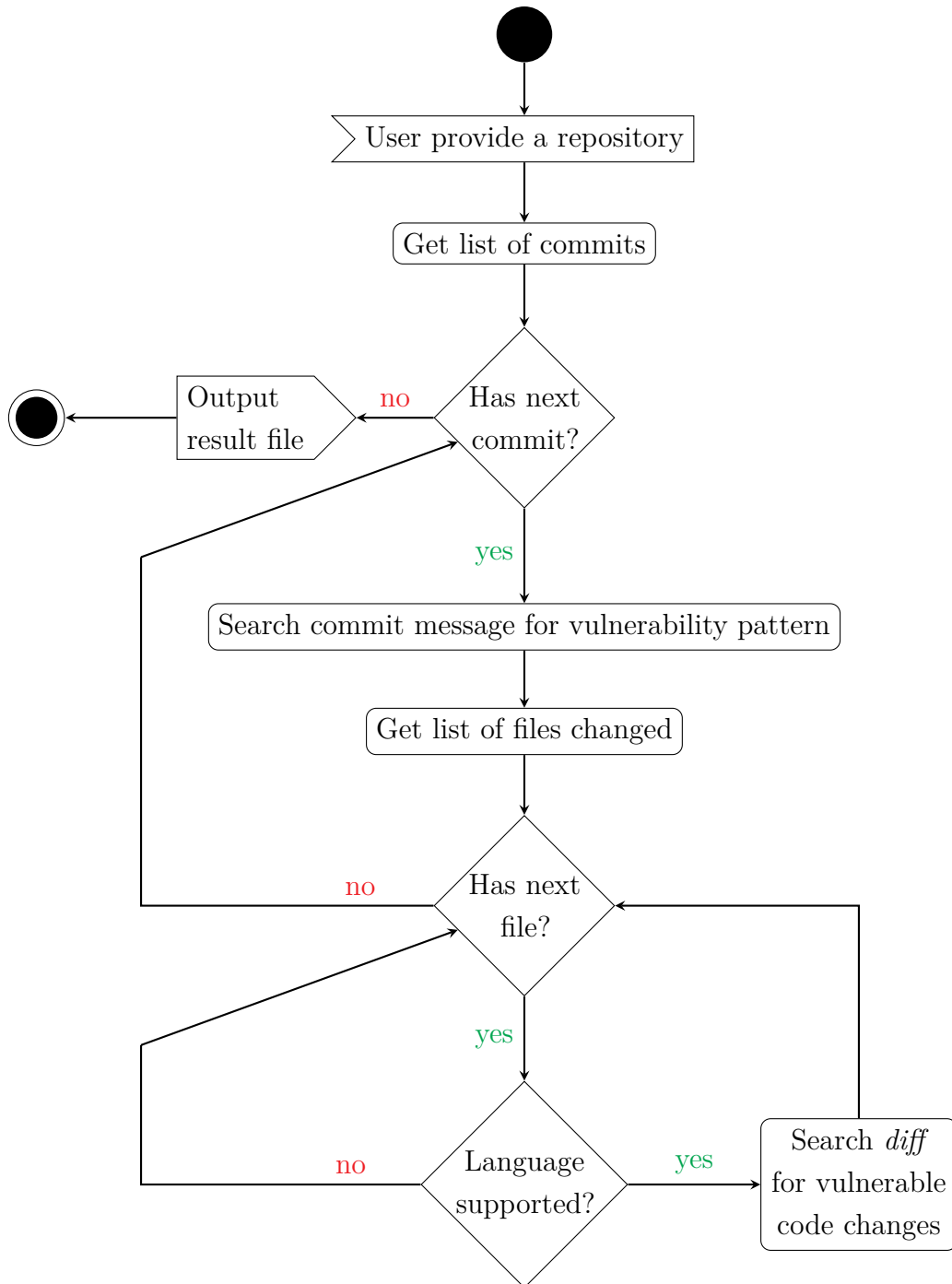


Figure 4.2: UML activity diagram of the repository mining tool

The program flow of the repository mining tool is shown in **Figure 4.2**. It is an general representation of the whole process. Hence, exhaustive details including exception handling, function calls, and user inputs validation are not included.

4.5 Commit Messages Matching

As mentioned in previous chapters and sections, there is already a concept of how commit messages matching should be functioning. It can be defined as the process of matching the commit message with the regular expression of each vulnerability pattern to find vulnerability-fixing commit. It requires some prior knowledge of the vulnerability patterns to define the regular expressions.

4.5.1 Vulnerability Patterns and Regular Expressions

The general idea of using regular expressions on commit messages is to construct the search queries with multiple conditions. Searching with regular expressions enables the tool to get results with one search, and avoid the usage of conditional statements to process the queries. Designing a specific, complete, and correct regular expression is challenging. This research question has two aspects to consider:

1. **Completeness:** If the objective was to achieve high completeness, then the regular expression would be designed to cover a broad range of string patterns. This would match more commit messages with the regular expression, which might possibly find more positive results. Similarly, false positive rate and the effort required for manual evaluation would increase.
2. **Correctness:** If the objective was to achieve high correctness, then the regular expression would be designed to be specific. This approach lowers the false positive rate, but increases the likelihood of generating false negatives.

The ideal design is to achieve high completeness and high correctness,

but this assumption is not realistic. This is because the quality of commit messages is not reliable, as discussed in **Section 3.5.1**. Achieving high correctness (low false positive rate) is desirable, but the additional effort in the improvement might not yield the corresponding improvements. Hence, the optimal approach would attempt to achieve high completeness first, then perform refinement on the regular expressions based on the results.

4.6 Vulnerable Code Searching

Commit messages matching (**Section 4.5**) is not sufficient to prove the validity of the results. A commit message does not always summarise the actual changes in the commit object. To correctly identify a vulnerability-fixing commit, it is required to analyse the code changes.

4.6.1 Code Searching Techniques

There are several approaches to scan the source code for vulnerabilities, ranging from simple text matching to complex data flow analysis. While The former is easier to build, and provides a quick way to find some potential security problems in the source code; the latter provides more accurate results, and it is able to detect complex vulnerabilities that involves nested control statements and function calls [16].

To select an approach, this research question has to consider several factors:

1. **Performance:** The amount of system resources and time required to complete one search of the chosen technique.
2. **Complexity:** The difficulty of implementing such technique.
3. **Feasibility:** The possibility measurement of producing a functional implementation of the chosen technique that satisfies the requirements.
4. **Accuracy:** The measurement of the ability to correctly identify the vulnerable lines of code.

4.6.2 Chosen Technique

After consideration of the factors listed in **Section 4.6.1**, it is chosen to implement a **static analysis technique**. It has been widely used in many security analysis tools including SpotBugs [89], Flawfinder [94], Bandit [11], and Progpilot [72]. As a result, it is required to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen technique to obtain an abstract indication of the expected results.

Strengths

- It scales accordingly to the code size. Unlike data flow analysis, it does not need to construct abstract syntax tree or control flow graph for its analysis process. Therefore, it is unlikely to encounter severe performance or memory issues.
- It is able to detect relatively simple vulnerabilities such as buffer overflows and SQL injections with high confidence. Although these vulnerabilities can sometimes be very complex as well.

Weaknesses

- It is unable to detect many security vulnerabilities automatically and accurately. These security vulnerabilities usually require sophisticated analysis method to detect.
- It is expected to generate numerous false positive results.
- It is difficult to prove the validity of the results. Since the analysis does not involve any data flow analysis, the reported results do not contain any detailed information such as variables value, and the steps to exploit the vulnerabilities.

4.6.3 Severity and Confidence Level

To mitigate the weaknesses, a severity and confidence level can be assigned to each vulnerability identified. They give the user an indication about the

seriousness of a vulnerability, and the likelihood for the vulnerability to be correctly identified. With these parameters, the user can now choose to filter the results with severity or confidence higher than a certain level. This would lower the effort and time required for manual evaluation.

4.7 Level of Details in Result File

Every Git commit object contains a lot of metadata [17]. Storing all metadata of each commit found will consume a substantial amount of storage space, as well as increasing the reading time of the result file. Hence, only relevant information that will be used in statistical evaluation are included, which are listed below:

1. The commit message (optional)
2. The date of the commit
3. The matching groups of regular expression
4. The vulnerability pattern of the matched regular expression
5. The vulnerable code changes identified, with line number, code severity level, and confidence level.

The commit message is just for the ease of user reference, which might be trivial as it does not have positive usage for the analysis but storing it will increase the file size.

Chapter 5

Implementation and Testing

This chapter will discuss the implementation of the repository mining tool based on the specifications described in previous chapters. It will also provide insights into the challenges encountered during the implementation process.

5.1 Project Environment and Structure

5.1.1 Environment

As concluded in **Section 3.3.1**, the project has been implemented in Python 3. There are several Python 3 versions available, and the project used the latest stable version at the time of this project, which is Python 3.7.3. Specifically, the source code is written with the new syntax and features introduced in the latest version, which implies that the older versions of Python 3 are not able to run it before updating.

5.1.2 Structure

Figure 5.1 below shows the directory structure of the project. It follows the design in **Figure 4.1**, where the file `vulnerability.py` and `language.py` contain the class `Vulnerability` and `Language` respectively. It is not necessary to create an individual file for each programming language in the

`languages` folder, but it is recommended in practice for better maintainability and clarity of the project.

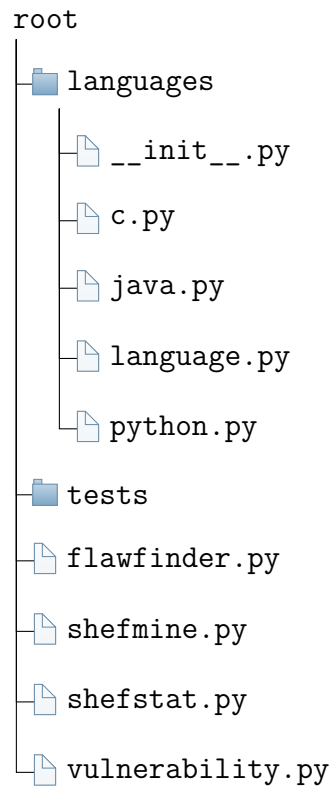


Figure 5.1: Directory struture of the project

httpd repo — 89fd8d0353f6dc234bf026594c7b4f00caa8dbd8: only comment changes
cd2b7a26c776b0754fb98426a67804fd48118708: CVE in message, comment and code changes

5.2 Commit Messages Matching

5.2.1 Expected Behaviour

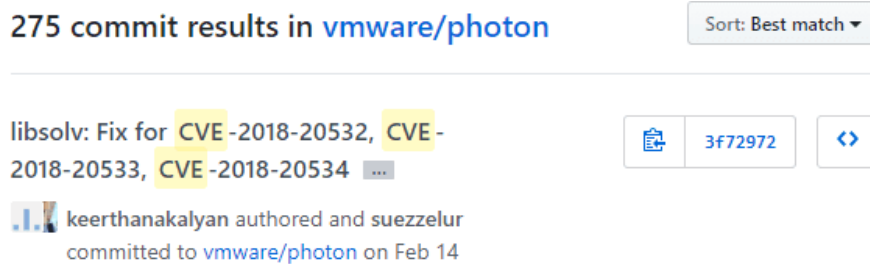


Figure 5.2: An example of expected search for the query ‘CVE’.

Figure 5.2 shows an example of expected search results returned for the query ‘CVE’.

5.3 Vulnerable Code Searching

5.3.1 Flawfinder Integration

ff

5.3.2 Bandit Integration

ff

5.3.3 User-defined Programming Language

Python is an **Object-oriented Programming (OOP)** language, it can fulfil the design specifications of **Section 4.3**. To support an extra programming language, an instance of the `Language` class must be created. The ‘constructor’ (the `__init__` method) takes three parameters, a rule set, a list of file extensions, and an optional regular expression object for non-context lines.

The importance and impact of the three parameters on the analysis results are explained below:

1. **Rule set:** This is related to the core research objectives of this project. The repository mining tool will scan the source code with each rule in the rule set and record the matching one. A well defined rule set could reduce the possibility of false positives. However, there is a still limit on the effectiveness of it as the tool is only performing pure regular expression search with these rules on the source code. An example of the structure of a rule set is shown below.

```
ruleset = {
    'createStatement\s*\(.*\)': {
        'severity': 'HIGH',
        'confidence': 'LOW'
    },
    ...
}
```

2. **File extensions:** Some programming languages use multiple file extensions as their source code file. The purpose of this parameter is to prevent the tool from carrying the search on irrelevant files.
3. **Regular expression object for non-context lines:** The purpose of this parameter is to improve the accuracy and performance of the tool. By excluding the non-context lines from the search process, the tool is able to perform faster, and it is less likely to obtain false positive results.

The tool will be word boundary \b

With these justifications, it is predicted that the tool would not have better performance than Flawfinder (**Section 5.3.1**) or Bandit (**Section 5.3.2**).

5.4 Storing the Results

In Python, dictionary and **JSON** are interchangeable

5.5 Exceptions and Errors

5.6 Testing

- self-created repo - not supported programming languages - supported programming languages

weakness of flawfinder: memcpy() changes to memcpy () will be detected as well

<https://github.com/apache/camel/commit/b9a311> Too many files changed will cause the program to hang, so skip the commit

5.6.1 Edge Cases

CVE-2019-0211 Vulneable code searching is unable to detect very specific code

Test Case #	Test Data	Expected Result	Actual Result	Status

Table 5.1: some test.

5.6.2 Verification and Validation

Chapter 6

Results and Discussion

This chapter

6.1 Introduction

6.2 Results Overview

Repositories are not randomly selected. Selected based on actual software usage of large software vendor.

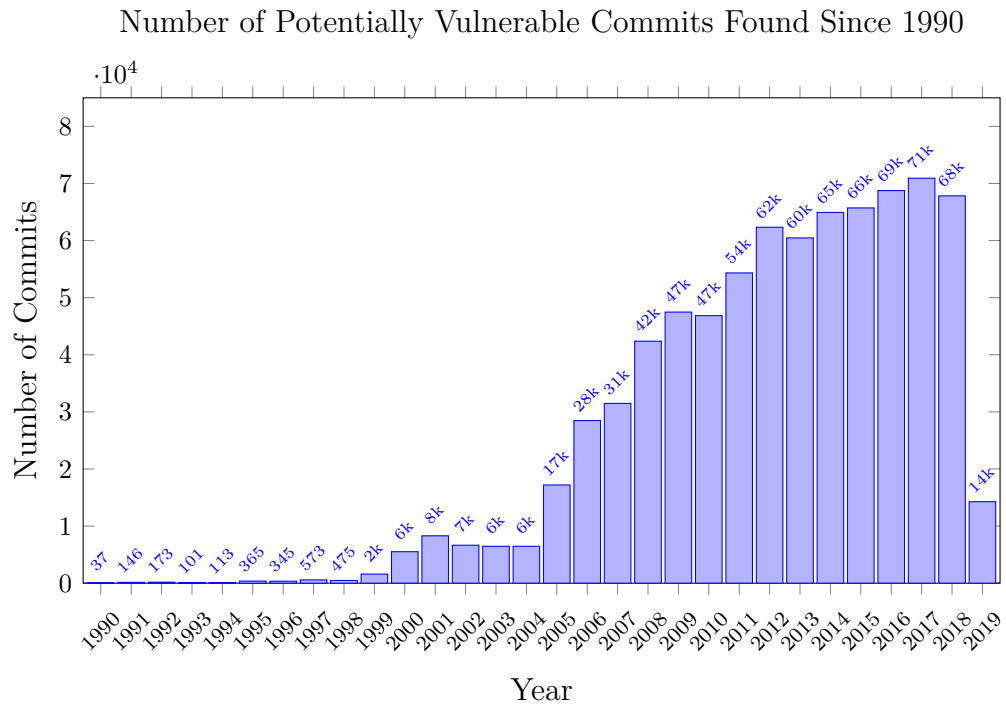


Figure 6.1: Number of potentially vulnerable commits found since 1990 in all repositories analysed.

CHAPTER 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vulnerabilities	Total	Percentage
Broken Access Control	190	0.13%
Broken Authentication and Session Management	978	0.67%
Buffer Overflow	1,365	0.94%
Bug Tracker Issue	34,799	23.90%
Context Leaks	17	0.01%
Cross-Site Request Forgery	204	0.14%
Cross-Site Scripting	310	0.21%
Distributed Denial-of-Service / Denial-of-Service	7,340	5.04%
Encryption Issues	24,291	16.68%
Hard Coded	1,766	1.21%
Injection	1,772	1.22%
Insufficient Attack Protection	191	0.13%
Memory Leaks	5,819	4.00%
Miscellaneous	14,409	9.89%
Null Pointers	7,803	5.36%
Overflow	4,929	3.38%
Resource Leaks	98	0.07%
Path / Directory Traversal	177	0.12%
SHA-1 Collision	1	0.00%
Security Misconfiguration	10,457	7.18%
Sensitive Data Exposure	22,657	15.56%
Using Components with Known Vulnerabilities	186	0.13%
Underprotected APIs	5,862	4.03%
Total	145,621	100.00%

Table 6.1: Vulnerabilities matched by the regular expressions in all repositories analysed.

6.3 Case Study

6.4 Problems

Linux repo 224426f168aa4af3dcb628e6edaa824d32d60e6f, date is year 1970, parent is year 2007 09f2724a786f76475ef2985cf84f5359c553aade, date is year 2030, parent is year 2008 12ca45fea91cfbb09df828bea958b47348caee6d, date is year 2037, parent is year 2009

6.5 Evaluation

6.6 Goals Achieved

6.7 Further Work

pyhton multiprocessing

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Acronyms

APIs application processing interfaces. 1

CLI Command-line Interface. 29, 30

CVE Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures. viii, 2, 6–8, 12, 19, 39

CWE Common Weakness Enumeration. 6

FLOSS Free/Libre and Open Source Software. 1

GUI Graphical User Interface. 28–30

HPC High Performance Computing. 28–30

JSON JavaScript Object Notation. 3, 17, 20, 21, 29, 41

MSR Mining Software Repositories. 9, 14

NVD National Vulnerability Database. 1

OOP Object-oriented Programming. 39

OWASP Open Web Application Security Project. 2, 7, 8

stdout Standard Output. 29

XML Extensible Markup Language. 20

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