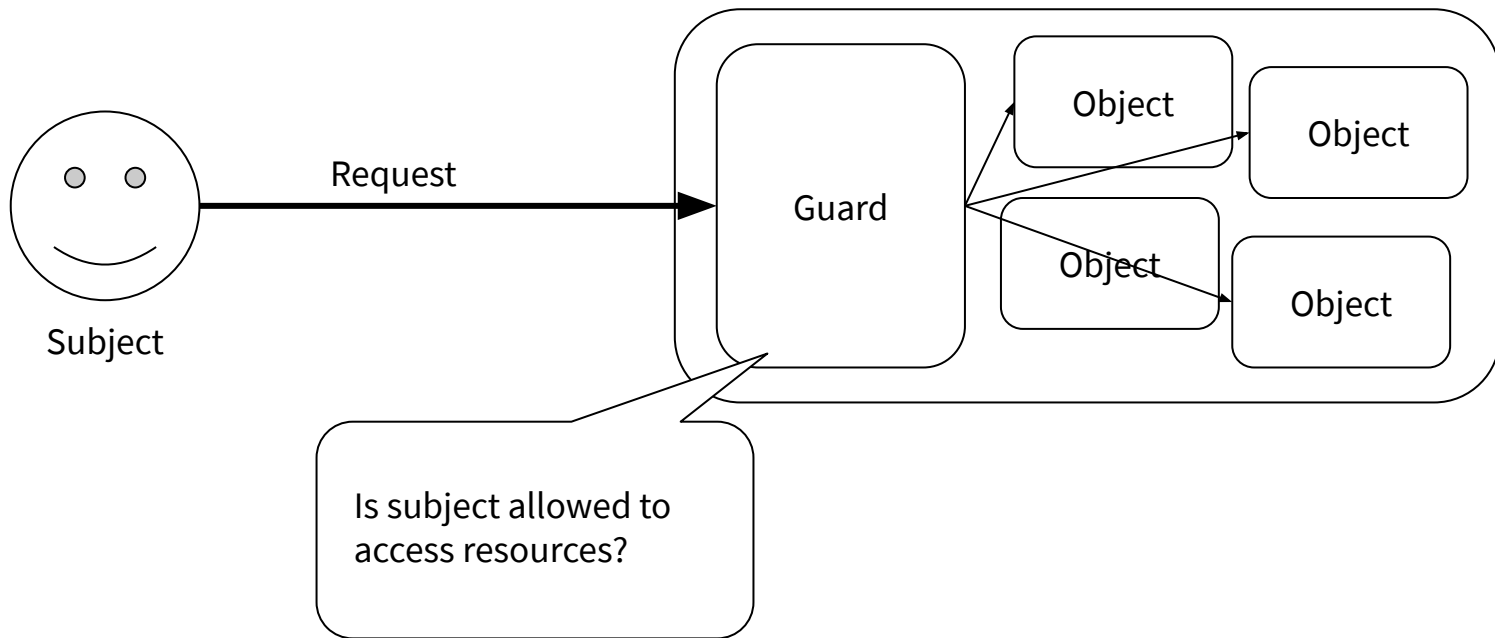# Capabilities

COS 316: Principles of Computer System Design
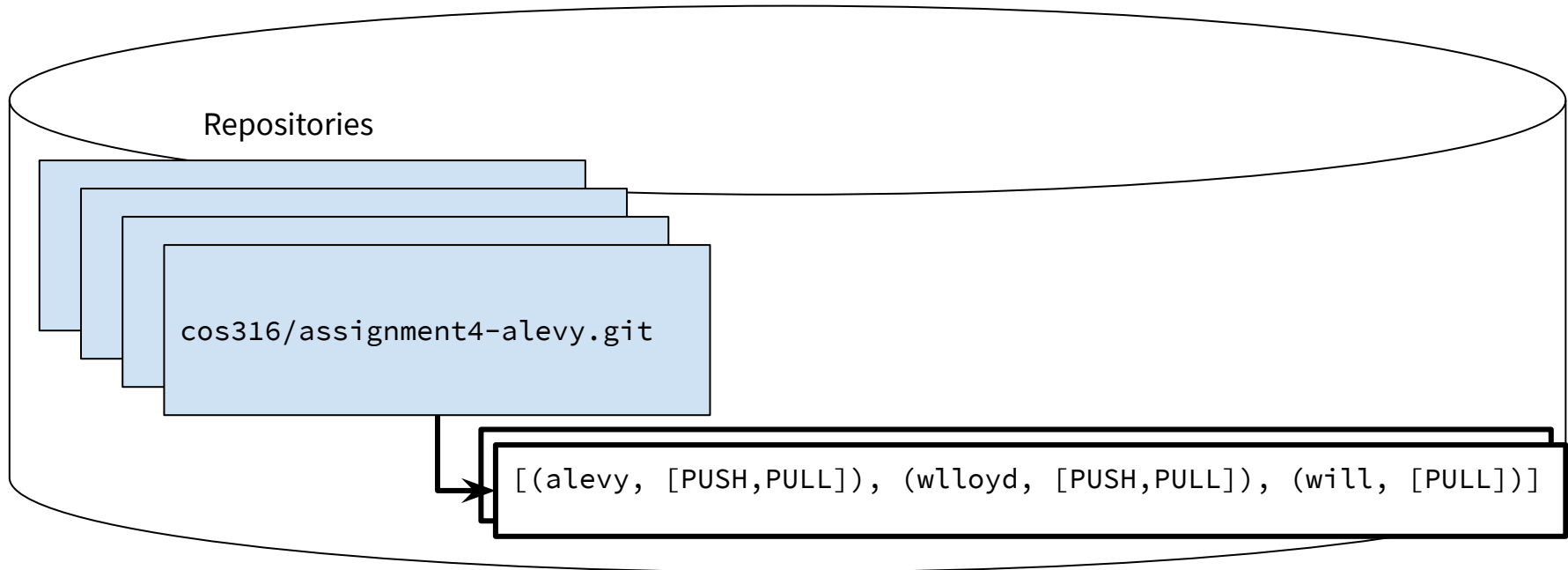
Amit Levy & Wyatt Lloyd

Last Time - The Guard Model

Last Time - Access Control Lists

Associate a list of (user, permissions) with each resource

Last Time - Access Control Lists

Advantages

- Simple to implement
- Simple to administer
- Easy to revoke access

Drawbacks

- Tradeoff granularity for simplicity
  - More granular permissions require more complex rules in the guard
- Doesn't scale well
  - E.g. need up to Users X Repos X Access Right entries in ACL table
- Centralized access control
  - Needs server's cooperation to delegate access

An Alternative - Capabilities

"[A] token, ticket, or key that gives the possessor permission to access an entity or object in a computer system." - *Capability-Based Computer Systems*

- Self-describing
  - Contains both object name and permitted operations
- Globally meaningful
  - Object and operation names are not subject-specific
- Transferrable
  - A subject can pass a capability to another (e.g. a sub-process, via IPC, a third-party app, etc)
  - Ideally can delegate subset of capabilities
- Unforgeable
  - Subjects cannot create capabilities with arbitrary permissions

File Descriptors as Proto-Capabilities

FD

5

Process
Kernel

FD table

| rw | rw | rw | rw | rw | rw | rw |
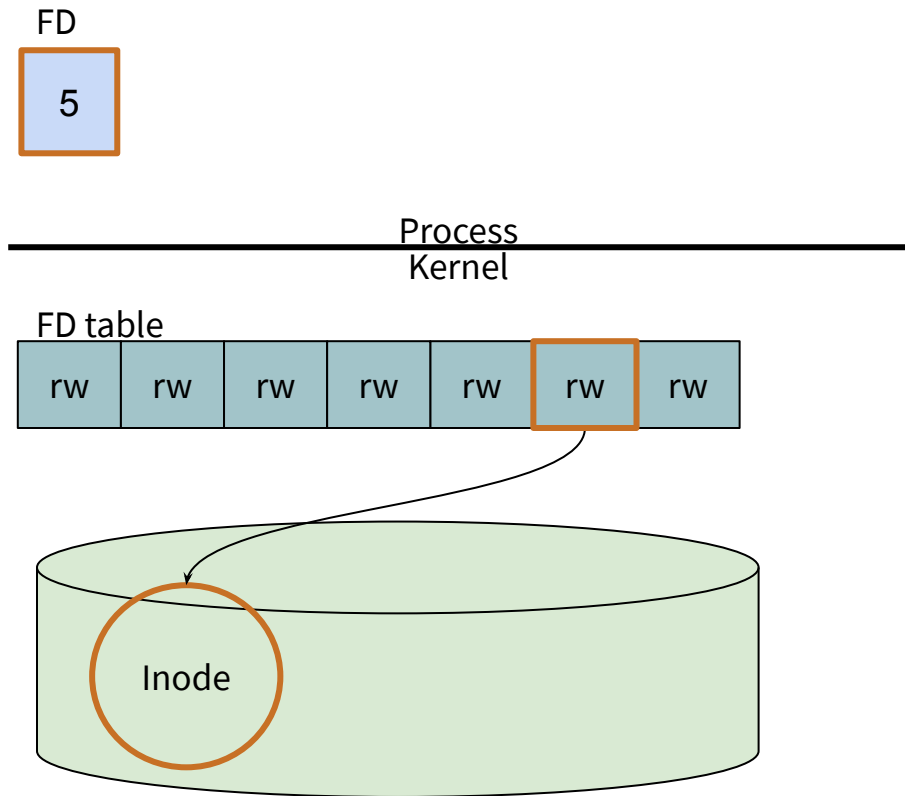
Inode

- Unforgeable ✓
  - Process-level fd is just an index in a kernel structure
- Self-describing ✓
  - Kernel fd contains reference to inode + permissions
- Globally meaningful ✗
  - Fds are process-specific
- Transferrable ✓/ ✗
  - Via IPC sendmsg/recvmsg

Consider a GitHub-like Ecosystem
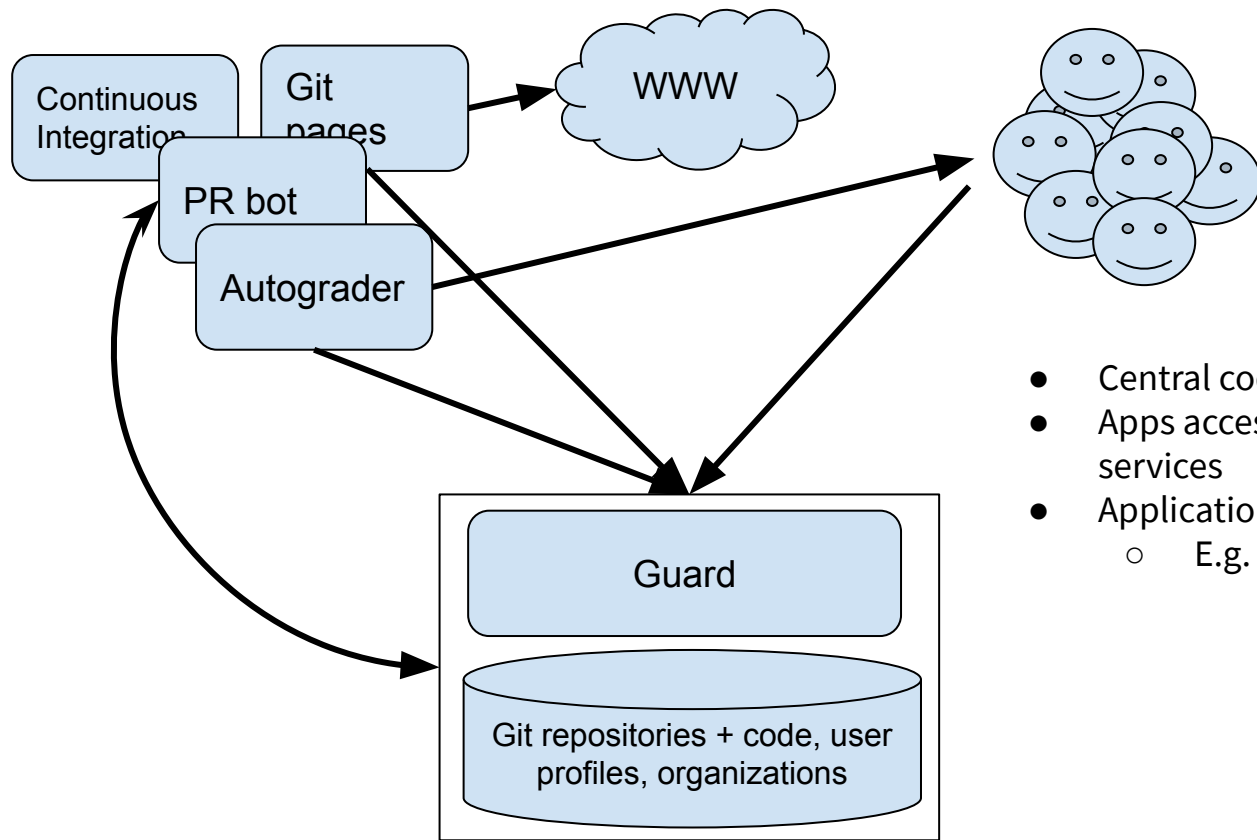
- Central code DB
- Apps access DB resources to provide extra services
- Application access must be restricted:
  - E.g. don't make private repos public

User Permissions using Capabilities

Hand out communicable, unforgeable tokens encoding:

- Object
- Access right

Users store capabilities, not the database
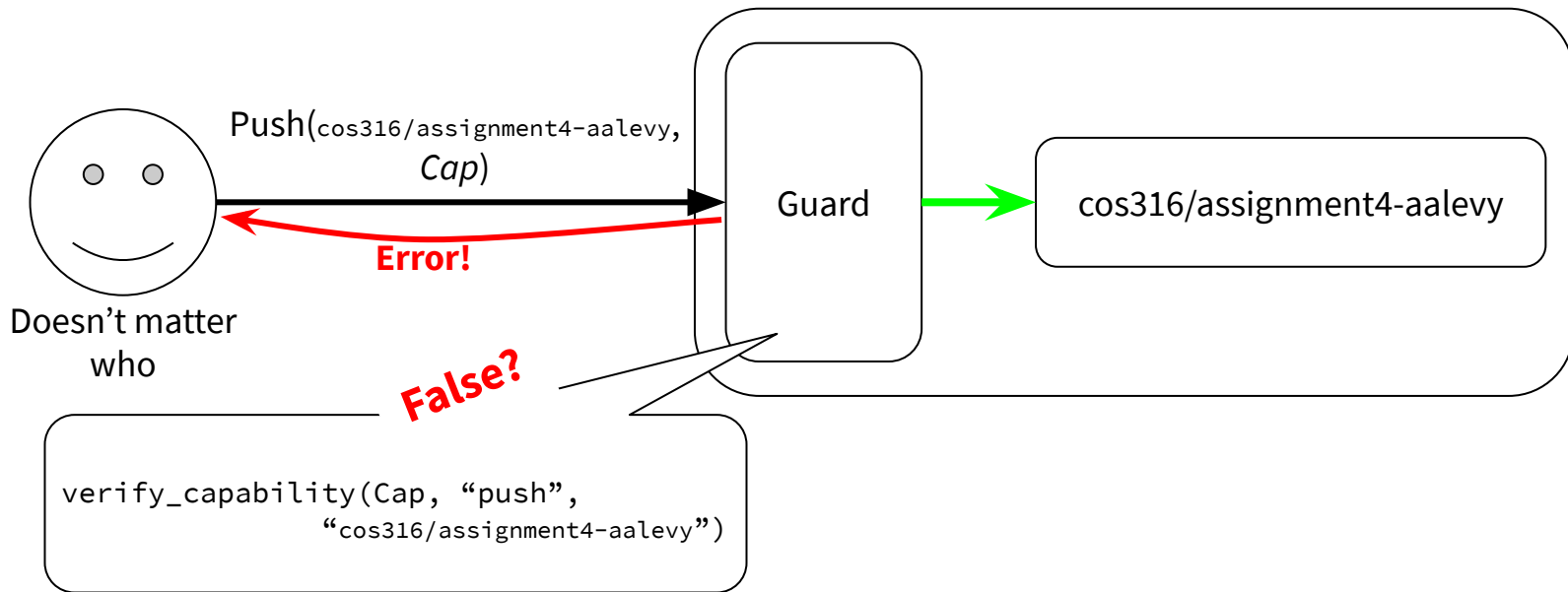
E.g.

"push(cos316/assignment4-aalevy)"

"pull(cos316/assignment4-aalevy)"

Implementing Capabilities with HMAC

HMAC - a keyed-hash function: `hmac(secret_key, data)` hash of data
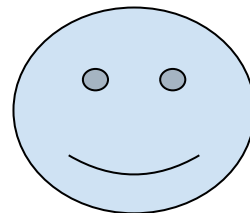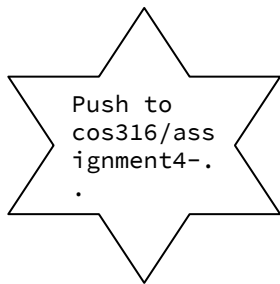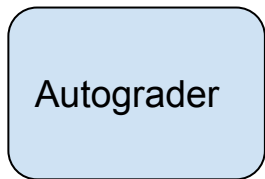
```
fn gen_capability(op, repo) {
  hmac(db_secret, fmt.Sprintf("%s(%s)", op, repo))
}


fn verify_capability(cap, op, repo) {
  cap == hmac(db_secret, fmt.Sprintf("%s(%s)", op, repo))
}
```
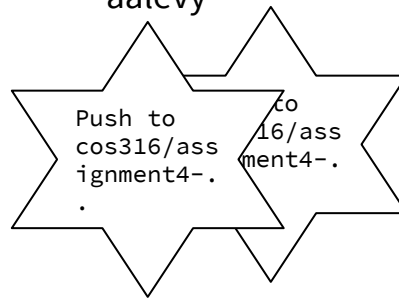
Capabilities in Action

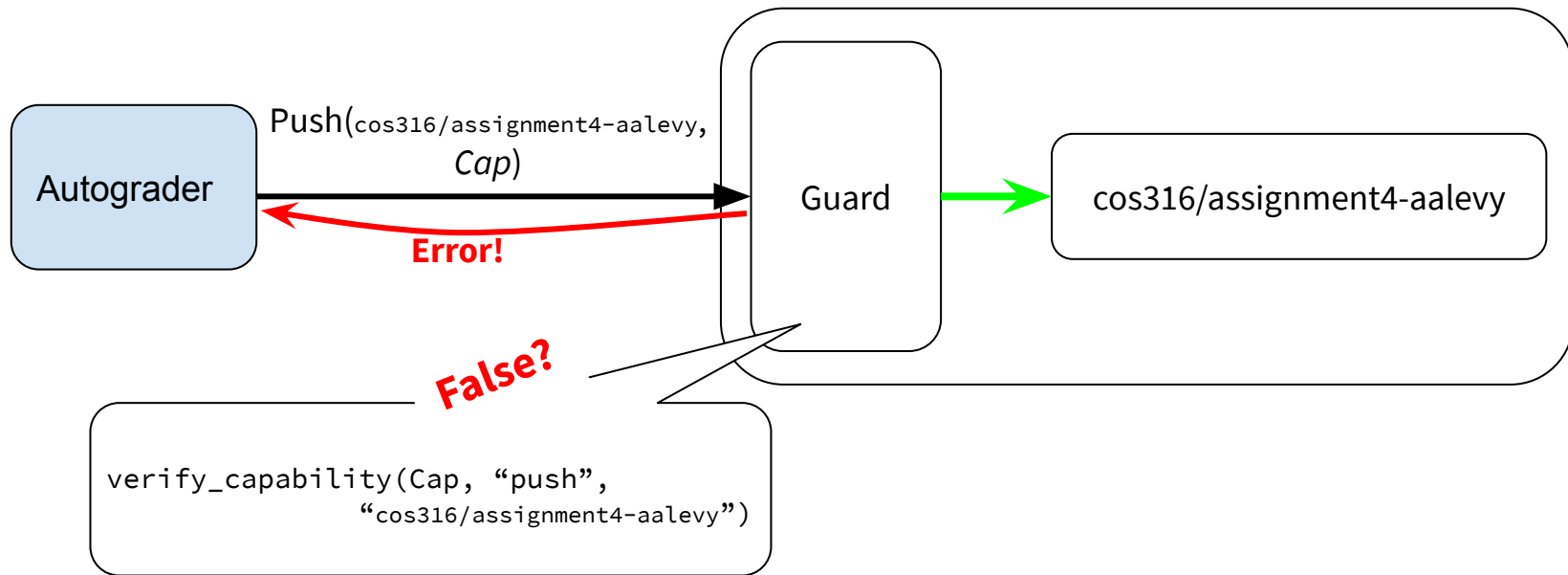# Extending Capabilities to Applications

- Users can simply give applications a subset of their capabilities

Autograder

Push to
cos316/ass
ignment4-.
.

aalevy

Push to
cos316/ass
ignment4-.
.

to
16/ass
ment4-.
.

Extending Capabilities to Applications

Capabilities

Advantages

- Decentralized access control
    - Anyone can "pass" anyone a capability
- Scales well
- Granular permissions are simple to check

Drawbacks

- How do you revoke a capability?
- Moves complexity to users/clients
    - Users have to manage their capabilities now

Capabilities In The Wild

- Operating Systems
  - History of industry and research operating systems
    -
  - FreeBSD's Capsicum
  - Fuschia OS
- Web
  - S3 Signed URLs
    - URL to private resources, contain signature, expiration, permitted HTTP methods, etc
  - CDN-hosted images/videos (FB, Instagram, YouTube)
    - Browsing via Web page/app is protected by login+cookie, but media typically fetched unauthenticated

Next time...

We still have a problem!

The autograder is allowed to:

- read all cos316/ repositories
- comment on all cos316/ repositories

Can code from a private repository end up in a comment on a public repository?