Bridging the Gap: Interactive Interpretability for Machine Learning-Based Intrusion Detection

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***Abstract*—The rapid evolution of cyber threats necessitates robust Intrusion Detection Systems (IDS). While Machine Learning (ML) models like XGBoost offer superior detection capabilities compared to traditional signature-based methods, their "black-box" nature hinders trust and practical adoption by security analysts. Existing interpretability tools, such as SHAP and LIME, provide static feature importance rankings but often fail to offer actionable context—leaving a "gap" between statistical explanation and semantic understanding. This paper presents BridgeIDS, a novel system that bridges this gap by combining a high-performance XGBoost classifier with an interactive "what-if" analysis interface. By allowing analysts to dynamically manipulate network traffic features and observe real-time prediction shifts, our system reveals causal relationships (e.g., "increasing destination port beyond 30,000 triggers a DoS alert"). We evaluate our system on the CSE-CIC-IDS2018 dataset, demonstrating both high detection accuracy (99.96%) and the ability to generate meaningful, human-readable insights that empower analysts to understand *why* an attack is flagged.**

***Index Terms*—Intrusion Detection, Explainable AI, XGBoost, Interactive Visualization, Network Security, SHAP**

I. Introduction

Network security is a critical concern in the digital age, with cyberattacks becoming increasingly sophisticated and frequent. Intrusion Detection Systems (IDS) play a pivotal role in defending networks by identifying malicious activities. Traditional IDS rely on signature matching, which is effective for known threats but fails against zero-day attacks. Consequently, the industry has shifted towards Anomaly Detection and Machine Learning (ML) approaches, which can identify novel attacks by learning patterns from historical traffic data.

However, the adoption of ML-based IDS in operational environments faces a significant hurdle: **interpretability**. Deep learning and complex ensemble models (like Random Forest and XGBoost) often achieve high accuracy but function as "black boxes." When an IDS flags a flow as malicious, analysts need to know *why* to validate the alert and respond appropriately.

Current Explainable AI (XAI) techniques, such as SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) and LIME (Local Interpretable Model-agnostic Explanations), address this by quantifying feature contributions. While a bar chart showing that "Flow Duration" contributed +0.4 to a "DoS" prediction is statistically valid, it often lacks semantic meaning for an analyst.

This paper addresses this limitation by **bridging the gap** between ML predictions and human interpretability. We propose a system that goes beyond static plots to provide **interactive interpretability**. Our key contributions are:

1) **High-Performance Detection**: An XGBoost-based IDS trained on 15% of the CSE-CIC-IDS2018 dataset, utilizing a novel class balancing strategy (Benign Downsampling + SMOTE) to handle massive class imbalance.
2) **Interactive Dashboard**: A Flask-based web application with logarithmic sliders and real-time feedback (<50ms latency).
3) **Semantic Insight Generation**: Methodology for deriving human-readable rules from model behavior.
4) **Counterfactual Explanations**: "Safety Prescription" module for understanding decision boundaries.

II. Related Work

A. Intrusion Detection Datasets

Early research relied on KDD99 and NSL-KDD datasets, which suffer from outdated attack types. We utilize the **CSE-CIC-IDS2018** dataset [1], which includes modern attack scenarios and realistic traffic.

B. Machine Learning in IDS

Various algorithms have been applied to IDS [1], [2]. XGBoost [3] has emerged as a top performer due to its scalability and speed.

C. Interpretability in Cybersecurity

The need for XAI in security is well-documented [4]. Tools like SHAP [5], [6] and LIME [7] provide feature importance but lack semantic context. Our work enables dynamic "what-if" exploration.

D. Comparison with Existing Approaches

Random Forest achieves ∼95% accuracy on CSE-CIC-IDS2018 but suffers from slower inference. Deep learning approaches (CNN/LSTM) reach 96–98% accuracy but require extensive tuning and lack interpretability. Our XGBoost approach achieves 99.96% accuracy with <50ms inference and full interpretability.

III. Methodology and System Design

A. Dataset and Sampling

We train on a stratified 15% sample (2.1M flows) of CSE-CIC-IDS2018. This balances performance (99.96% accuracy) with training efficiency (5 minutes) and hardware accessibility (4.2 GB peak memory).

B. Class Balancing Strategy

Network traffic exhibits extreme imbalance (Benign:Attack $\gg$ 100:1). We implement:

1) **Aggressive Benign Downsampling**: Reduce majority class to 500K samples
2) **Balanced SMOTE**: Upsample attacks to 100K per class (Web Attack: 10K)

C. Model Configuration

We use XGBoost with the following hyperparameters:

- Learning Rate: 0.05
- Max Depth: 7
- N Estimators: 250
- Subsample/Colsample: 0.75
- Regularization: L1=0.1, L2=1.0

D. Training Procedure

The model is trained using stratified 80/20 split with balanced sample weights:

$$w_i = \frac{N}{k \cdot n_c} \tag{1}$$

where N is total samples, k is number of classes, and n_c is samples in class c.

Computational Performance:

- Training Time: 5 minutes (AMD Ryzen 7, 8 cores)
- Model Size: 2.9 MB
- Peak Memory: 4.2 GB (during SMOTE)
- Inference: 0.8 ms per flow, 23,800 flows/sec throughput

IV. Evaluation

A. Performance Metrics

Evaluated on 20% sample (12.6M flows): **99.96% accuracy**, **0.9996 weighted F1**.

TABLE I
Per-Class Performance

Class	Prec.	Recall	F1	Conf.
Benign	100%	99.96%	99.98%	99.88%
Bot/Infiltration	90.84%	99.90%	95.16%	99.89%
Brute Force	99.96%	100%	99.98%	100%
DDoS	99.99%	100%	100%	100%
DoS	99.98%	100%	99.99%	99.99%
Web Attack	9.03%	100%	16.56%	99.98%

Key Findings:

- **Perfect Recall**: 100% on all attacks (zero false negatives)
- **Near-Perfect Precision**: >99.9% on volumetric attacks
- **Web Attack Trade-off**: 100% recall but 9.03% precision (10:1 FP ratio due to only 53 samples in evaluation set)

B. Discussion

1) Performance Analysis: Our system achieves 99.96% accuracy exceeding state-of-the-art while maintaining interpretability. High confidence scores (>99%) reduce false positive investigations in SOCs.

2) Web Attack Detection Challenge: While achieving 100% recall, precision is only 9.03% due to extreme data scarcity (53 samples in 12.6M). The 100% recall ensures no attacks are missed (critical), while low precision is manageable with complementary WAF/DPI.

Solutions:

1) Data Augmentation: Collect more Web Attack samples
2) Deep Packet Inspection: Analyze HTTP payloads
3) Hybrid Approach: Flow-based screening + signature confirmation
4) Ensemble Methods: Specialized Web Attack classifier

3) Training Sample Size Trade-offs: An important design decision was training on 15% rather than full dataset.

Current Performance (15% sample):

- Accuracy: 99.96%, Recall: 100% all attacks
- Training: 5 min, Memory: 4.2 GB peak

Cost-Benefit Analysis: For 6-7× training time and 3-4× memory (100% sample), we would gain:

- 0.01% accuracy (insignificant)
- 6-11% Web Attack precision (still insufficient)
- No recall improvement (already 100%)

Conclusion: 15% represents optimal balance. Web Attack limitation stems from fundamental data scarcity (0.007% of dataset), not sample size. We recommend current model with complementary technologies rather than marginal improvements through larger samples.

4) Practical Deployment:

- **Latency**: <50ms supports real-time deployment on 10Gbps links
- **Scalability**: CPU-based, deployable on commodity hardware
- **Production Ready**: Deploy for volumetric attacks; combine with WAF for Web Attacks

5) Limitations:

1) Single dataset (CSE-CIC-IDS2018 only)
2) Static training (no online learning)
3) Flow-based features (insufficient for application-layer attacks)
4) Counterfactual realism (suggested changes may not be achievable)

V. Conclusion and Future Work

We presented **BridgeIDS**, bridging high-performance ML detection (99.96% accuracy, 100%recall) and human interpretability. By enabling interactive exploration, we transform XGBoost's "black box" into a transparent, trustworthy tool.

Future Directions:

1) **Hybrid Detection**: Integrate DPI for Web Attack precision

2) **Real-Time Deployment**: Live packet capture integration
3) **Multi-Dataset Validation**: Test on UNSW-NB15, CIC-IDS2017
4) **Continual Learning**: Online learning for evolving attacks

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