**Chapter 18**

**Tamper Resistance**

**It is relatively easy to build an encryption system that is secure if it**  
 **is working as intended and is used correctly but it is still very hard**

**to build a system that does not compromise its security in situations**

**in which it is either misused or one or more of its sub-components**  
 **fails (or is ’encouraged’ to misbehave) ... this is now the only area**  
 **where the closed world is still a long way ahead of the open world**  
 **and the many failures we see in commercial cryptographic systems**

**provide some evidence for this.**

– BRIAN GLADMAN

**The amount of careful, critical security thinking that has gone into a**  
 **given security device, system or program is inversely proportional to**

**the amount of high-technology it uses.**

– ROGER JOHNSTON

**18.1** **Introduction**

Tamper-resistant devices are everywhere now. Examples we’ve discussed so far  
 include:

*•* the EMV chips used in bank cards and the SIMs used in mobile phones

*•* the contactless cards used as transport tickets and the smartcards used in

*•* chips used for *accessory control* in printer toner cartridges and game-

*•* the TPM chips in phones, laptops and servers to provide a *root of trust* to

*•* hardware security modules used to encrypt bank PINs, not just in bank

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*18.1. INTRODUCTION*

*•* the NFC chips used in Android phones to store contactless payment cre-  
 crypto keys;

*•* cryptographic modules buried in vending machines that sell everything  
 activate your electricity meter;

*•* various chips used for *manufacturing control* by ﬁrms who want to have  
 to see extra products made without their consent on a ‘third shift’ and  
 sold on the grey market.

Many of the devices on the market are insecure. In section 4.3.1 I described

how reverse engineering remote key entry devices for cars led to class breaks that  
 notably increased car theft; in section 13.2.5 I described how reverse engineer-  
 ing the Mifare card compromised many building locks and transport ticketing  
 systems; and in section 12.6.1.1, I described card payment terminals that could  
 be compromised trivially, leading to card counterfeiting and transaction manip-  
 ulation attacks.

Yet some are pretty good. The best cryptographic modules used in banking

and government withstand all known types of physical attack, and can only be  
 defeated when people either run insecure software on them or rely on insecure  
 devices to interface with users. Smartcard tamper resistance has evolved in

a long war between pay-TV pirates cloning subscriber cards and the pay-TV  
 industry trying to stop them, and was honed in an arms race between ﬁrms that  
 wanted to lock down their products, and others who wanted to unlock them. The  
 tussles over printer cartridges were important here, as both the printer makers  
 who were trying to control aftermarkets, and the independent cartridge makers  
 who were trying to break into these markets, are acting lawfully. Other hackers  
 work for lawyers, reverse engineering products to prove patent infringements.  
 There are academics who hack systems for glory, and to push forward the state  
 of the art. And ﬁnally there are lots of grey areas. If you ﬁnd a way to unlock  
 a mobile phone, so that it can be used on any network, is that a crime? It  
 depends on how you do it, and on what country you’re in.

Given the wide range of products and the huge variation in quality, the

security engineer needs to understand what tamper resistance is, and what it  
 can and can’t do. In this chapter I’m going to take you through the past thirty  
 years of evolution of attack and defence.

If a computer cannot resist physical tampering, an attacker can simply

change the software. Computers in data centres are protected by physical barri-  
 ers, sensors and alarms. And an ATM is basically a PC in a safe with banknote  
 dispensers and alarm sensors, often bolted to a wall or a plinth.

Where tamper resistance is needed purely for integrity and availability, it

can sometimes be implemented using replication on di↵erent servers that per-  
 form transactions simultaneously and vote on the result; this is being rein-  
 vented nowadays with blockchains and other consensus protocols. The thresh-  
 old schemes discussed in section 15.4 can also provide conﬁdentiality for key  
 material. But tamper-resistant devices can provide conﬁdentiality for the data

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*18.2. HISTORY*

too, and the arrival of CPUs that support enclaves such as SGX and TrustZone  
 hold out the prospect of computing with encrypted data in cloud services.

**18.2** **History**

The use of tamper resistance in cryptography goes back centuries [1001]. Naval  
 codebooks were weighted so they could be thrown overboard if capture was  
 imminent; the dispatch boxes used by British government ministers’ aides to  
 carry state papers were lead-lined to make sure they’d sink. Codes have been  
 printed in water-soluble ink; Russian one-time pads were printed on cellulose  
 nitrate, so they’d burn furiously if lit; and one US wartime cipher machine  
 came with self-destruct thermite charges. But key material was often captured  
 in surprise attacks, so attempts were made to automate the tamper response  
 process. Some mechanical cipher machines were built so that opening the case  
 erased the key settings, and early electronic devices followed suit.

After the notorious Walker family sold US Navy key material to the Russians

for over 20 years [876], engineers paid more attention to the question of how to  
 protect keys in transit too. The goal was ‘to reduce the street value of key  
 material to zero’, and this can be achieved either by *tamper resistant* devices  
 from which the key cannot be readily extracted, or *tamper evident* ones from  
 which key extraction would be obvious.

Paper keys were once carried in ‘tattle-tale containers’, designed to show

evidence of tampering. When electronic key distribution came along, a typical  
 solution was the ‘ﬁll gun’: a portable device that dispenses crypto keys in a  
 controlled way. Nowadays the physical transport of crypto key material usually  
 involves a smartcard, or a similar chip packaged as a key. Your SIM card and  
 bank card are just the most visible examples. The control of key material also  
 acquired broader purposes, with both the US and the UK governments using it  
 to restrict their networks to approved devices. Live key material would only be  
 supplied once the system had been properly accredited.

Once initial keys have been loaded, further keys may be distributed using

authentication protocols. Our subject here is the physical defenses against tam-  
 pering.

**18.3** **Hardware Security Modules**

The IBM 4758 (Figures 18.1 and 18.2) was the leading commercial cryptographic  
 processor in the early 2000s, and is important for four reasons. First, it was  
 the ﬁrst commercial product to be evaluated to the highest level of tamper  
 resistance (FIPS 140-1 level 4) [1399] then set by the US government. Second,  
 there is an extensive literature about it, including its history, hardware and  
 software [1795, 1998, 2001]. Third, it was therefore a high proﬁle target, and  
 from 2000–2005 my students and I put a lot of e↵ort into attacking it and  
 understanding the residual vulnerabilities. Fourth, the current IBM ﬂagship

product, the 4765, isn’t hugely changed except for ﬁxing some of the bugs we  
 found.

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*18.3. HARDWARE SECURITY MODULES*



Figure 18.1: – the IBM 4758 cryptoprocessor (courtesy of Steve Weingart)

The back story starts in the 1970s, when Mikhail Atalla had the idea of

a black-box cryptographic module to manage bank PINs. As early crypto-

graphic schemes for ATMs were rather weak, IBM developed a better block  
 cipher which became the Data Encryption Standard, as described in Chapter 5.  
 There followed a period of intense research about precisely how block ciphers  
 could be used to manage PINs in a single bank, and then in a network of many  
 banks [1301]. The banking community realised that commercial operating sys-  
 tems were likely to remain insu�cient to protect PINs, particularly from bank  
 insiders, and decided to use separate hardware to manage them.

This led to the development of standalone cryptographic modules or *hard-*

*ware security modules* (HSMs), as ﬁntech people call them. These are micro-  
 computers encased in robust metal enclosures, with encryption hardware and  
 special *key memory*, static RAM that is zeroized when the enclosure is opened.  
 Initially, this just involved wiring the power supply to the key memory through  
 a number of lid switches. So whenever the maintenance crew came to replace  
 batteries, they’d open the lid and destroy the keys. Once they’d ﬁnished, the  
 HSM custodians would reload the key material. In this way, the HSM’s owner  
 could hope that its keys were under the unique control of its own trustworthy  
 sta↵.

**How to hack a cryptoprocessor (1)**

The obvious attack is just to steal the keys. In early HSMs, the master keys

were kept in PROMs that were loaded into a special socket in the device to  
 be read during initialization, or as strings of numbers that were typed in at a  
 console. The PROMs could be pocketed, taken home and read out. Cleartext

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*18.3. HARDWARE SECURITY MODULES*



Figure 18.2: – the 4758 partially opened showing (from top left downward)  
 the circuitry, aluminium electromagnetic shielding, tamper-sensing mesh and  
 potting material (courtesy of Frank Stajano)

paper keys were even easier: just scribble down a copy.

The ﬁx was shared control – to have two or three master key components,

and make the actual master key by combining them. The PROMs (or paper  
 keys) would be kept in di↵erent safes under the control of di↵erent departments.  
 This taught us that shared control is a serious security usability hazard. The  
 manual may tell the custodians to erase the live keys, let the engineer ﬁx the  
 device, and then re-load the keys afterwards. But many senior men used to  
 think that touching keyboards was women’s work, and even today they think  
 that technical work is beneath them. And who reads the manual anyway? So  
 managers often give both keys to the engineer to save the bother. In one case,  
 a dishonest engineer got them to enter the keys using a laptop that acted as a  
 terminal but had logging switched on [54]. I’ve even come across cases of paper  
 master keys for an automatic teller machine being kept in the correspondence  
 ﬁle in a bank branch, where any of the sta↵ could look them up.

**How to hack a cryptoprocessor (2)**

Early devices were vulnerable to attackers cutting through the casing. Second-

generation devices made physical attacks harder by adding photocells and tilt  
 switches. But the di�cult opponent is the maintenance engineer – who could  
 disable the sensors on one visit and extract the keys on the next.

By about 2000, the better products separated all the components that can

be serviced (such as batteries) from the core of the device (such as the tamper  
 sensors, cryptoprocessor, key memory and alarm circuits). The core was then  
 potted into a solid block of a hard, opaque substance such as epoxy. The idea

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was that any physical attack would involve cutting or drilling, which could be  
 detected by the guard who accompanies the engineer into the bank computer  
 room1. At least it should leave evidence of tampering after the fact. This

is the level of protection needed for medium-level evaluations under the FIPS  
 standard.

**How to hack a cryptoprocessor (3)**

However, if a competent attacker can get unsupervised access to the device

for even a short period of time – and, to be realistic, that’s what the maintenance  
 engineer probably has, as the guard doesn’t understand what’s going on – then  
 potting the device core is inadequate. For example, you might scrape away

the potting with a knife and drop the probe from a logic analyzer on to one of  
 the chips. In theory, scraping the sticky epoxy should damage the components  
 inside; in practice, it’s just a matter of patience. Cryptographic algorithms such  
 as RSA, DES and AES have the property that an attacker who can monitor any  
 bitplane during the computation can recover the key [860].

So the high-end products acquired a tamper-sensing barrier. An early exam-

ple appeared in IBM’s *µ*ABYSS system in the mid-1980s, which used loops of  
 40-gauge nichrome wire wound loosely around the device as it was embedded in  
 epoxy, and then connected to a sensing circuit [1998]. The theory was that tech-  
 niques such as milling, etching and laser ablation would break the wire, erasing  
 the keys. But the wire-in-epoxy technique can be vulnerable to slow erosion  
 using sand blasting; when the sensing wires become visible at the surface of  
 the potting, shunts can be connected round them. In 2018 Sergei Skoroboga-  
 tov managed to use a combination of acid etching and masking to expose a  
 battery-powered chip, on the Vasco Digipass 270, showing that given decent lab  
 technique you can indeed attack live circuits protected by wires in epoxy [1781].

The next major product from IBM, the 4753, used a metal shield combined

with a membrane printed with a pattern of conductive ink and surrounded by a  
 more durable material of similar chemistry. The idea was that any attack would  
 break the membrane with high probability. The 4758 had an improved tamper-  
 sensing membrane in which four overlapping zig-zag conducting patterns were  
 doped into a urethane sheet, which was potted in a chemically similar substance  
 so that an attacker cutting into the device had di�culty even detecting the  
 conductive path, let alone connecting to it. This potting surrounds the metal  
 shielding which in turn contains the cryptographic core. The design is described  
 in more detail in [1795].

**How to hack a cryptoprocessor (4)**

The next class of attack exploited *memory remanence*, the fact that many

kinds of computer memory retain some trace of data that have been stored  
 there. Once a certain security module had run for some years using the same  
 master keys, their values *burned in* to the device’s static RAM. On power-up,  
 about 90% of the relevant memory bits would assume the values of the previ-  
 ously stored secret keybits, which was quite enough to recover the keys [107].

1That at least was the theory; experience suggests it’s a bit much to ask a minimum-wage

guard to ensure that a specialist in some exotic piece of equipment repairs it using some tools  
 but not others.

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Memory remanence a↵ects not just static and dynamic RAM, but other storage  
 media too. The relevant engineering and physics issues are discussed in [837]  
 and [840], and in 2005 Sergei Skorobogatov discovered how to extract data

from Flash memory in microcontrollers, even after it had been ‘erased’ several  
 times [1770]; like it or not, the wear-levelling processors in Flash chips become  
 part of your trusted computing base. RAM contents can also be *burned in* by  
 ionising radiation, so radiation sensing or hardening might make sense too.

**How to hack a cryptoprocessor (5)**

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| Computer memory can also be frozen by low temperatures. By the 1980s it  was realized that below about -20*o* C, static RAM contents can persist for several |
| seconds after power is removed. This extends to minutes at the temperatures  of liquid nitrogen. So an attacker might freeze a device, remove the power, cut  through the tamper sensing barrier, extract the RAM chips containing the keys,  and power them up again in a test rig. |

In 2008, Alex Halderman and colleagues developed this into the *cold boot*

*attack* on encryption keys in PCs and phones [854]. Modern DRAM retains  
 memory contents for several seconds after power is removed, and even longer at  
 low temperatures; by chilling memory with a freezing spray, then rebooting the  
 device with a lightweight operating system, keys can often be read out. Software  
 encryption of disk contents can be defeated unless there are mechanisms to  
 zeroise the keys on power-down. Even keeping keys in special hardware such  
 as a TPM isn’t enough if all it’s doing is limiting the number of times you can  
 guess the hard disk encryption password, but then copying the master key to  
 main memory once you get the password right so that the CPU can do the rest  
 of the work. You need to really understand what guarantees the crypto chip is  
 giving you – a matter we’ll discuss at greater length in the chapter on Advanced  
 Cryptographic Engineering.

Anyway, the better cryptographic devices have temperature and radiation

alarms. But modern RAM chips exhibit a wide variety of memory remanence  
 behaviors; remanence seems to have got longer as feature sizes have shrunk,  
 and in unpredictable ways even within standard product lines. So although

your product might pass a remanence test using a given make of SRAM chip, it  
 might fail the same test with the same make of chip purchased a year later [1768].  
 This shows the dangers of relying on a property of some component to whose  
 manufacturer this property is unimportant.

The main constraints on the HSM alarms are similar to those we encoun-

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| tered with more general alarms. There’s a trade-o↵ between the false alarm  rate and the missed alarm rate, and thus between security and robustness. Vi-  bration, power transients and electromagnetic interference can be a problem,  but temperature is the worst. A device that self-destructs if frozen can’t be sent  reliably through normal distribution channels, as aircraft holds can get as low as  -40*o*C. (We’ve bought crypto modules on eBay and found them dead on arrival.)  Military equipment makers have the converse problem: their kit must be rated  from -55*o* to +155*o* C. Some military devices use protective detonation; mem-  ory chips are potted in steel cans with a thermite charge precisely calculated to  destroy the chip without causing gas release from the can. Meeting simultane-  ous targets for tamper resistance, temperature tolerance, radiation hardening, | | |
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*18.3. HARDWARE SECURITY MODULES*

shipping safety, weight and cost can be nontrivial.

**How to hack a cryptoprocessor (6)**

The next set of attacks on cryptographic hardware involve monitoring the

RF and other electromagnetic signals emitted by the device, or even injecting  
 signals into it and measuring their externally visible e↵ects. This technique,  
 which is variously known as ‘Tempest’, ‘power analysis,’ ‘side-channel attacks’  
 or ‘emission security’, is such a large subject that I devote the next chapter to  
 it.

As far as the 4758 was concerned, the strategy was to have solid aluminium

shielding and to low-pass ﬁlter the power supply to block the egress of any signals  
 at the frequencies used internally for computation. This shielding is inside the  
 tamper-sensing membrane, to prevent an opponent cutting a slot that could  
 function as an antenna.

**How to hack a cryptoprocessor (7)**

We never ﬁgured out how to attack the hardware of the 4758. The attacks we

have seen on high-end systems have involved the exploitation of logical rather  
 than physical ﬂaws. One hardware security module, the Chrysalis-ITS Luna  
 CA3, had its key token’s software reverse engineered by Mike Bond, Daniel  
 Cvrˇcek and Steven Murdoch who found code that enabled an unauthenticated  
 “Customer Veriﬁcation Key” to be introduced and used to certify the export  
 of live keys [283]. Most recently, in 2019, Gabriel Campana and Jean-Baptiste  
 B´edrune found a bu↵er overﬂow attack on the Gemalto Safenet Protect Server  
 PSI-E2/PSE2 by fuzzing the HSM emulator that came with its software devel-  
 opment kit, then checked this on a real HSM, and wrote code to upload arbitrary  
 ﬁrmware, which is persistent and can download all the secrets [203].

This did not happen to IBM’s 4758, which had a formally veriﬁed operating

system. But most of its users ran a banking crypto application called CCA  
 that is described in [915]. Mike Bond and I discovered that the application pro-  
 gramming interface (API) that CCA exposed to the host contained a number  
 of exploitable ﬂaws. The e↵ect was that a programmer with access to the host  
 could send the security module a series of commands that would cause it to leak  
 PINs or keys. These vulnerabilities were largely the legacy of previous encryp-  
 tion devices with which 4758 users needed to be backward compatible, and in  
 fact most other security modules were worse. Such attacks were hard to stop, as  
 from time to time Visa would mandate new cryptographic operations to support  
 new payment network features and these would introduce new systemic vulner-  
 abilities across the whole ﬂeet of security modules [22]. Some HSMs now have  
 two APIs: an internal one which the vendor tries to keep clean (but which needs  
 to have the ability to import and export keys) and an external one which im-  
 plements the standards of whatever industry the HSM is being used to support.  
 The software between the two APIs may be trusted, but can be hard to make  
 trustworthy if the external API is insecure. In e↵ect, it has to anticipate and  
 block API attacks. So many banks pay top dollar for secure HSMs which they  
 use for formal compliance while actually relying on other access control mecha-  
 nisms to shield the devices from attack. There are even specialist ﬁrms selling  
 ﬁrewalls to shield HSMs from software-based harm. I’ll discuss API attacks in

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*18.4. EVALUATION*

detail in the chapter on Advanced Cryptographic Engineering.

**18.4** **Evaluation**

A few comments about the evaluation of HSMs are in order before we go on  
 to discuss cheaper devices. When IBM launched the 4753 they proposed the  
 following classiﬁcation of attackers in the associated white paper [9]:

1. Class 1 attackers – ‘clever outsiders’ – are often very intelligent but may

have insu�cient knowledge of the system. They may have access to only  
 moderately sophisticated equipment. They often try to take advantage of  
 an existing weakness in the system, rather than try to create one.

2. Class 2 attackers – ‘knowledgeable insiders’ – have substantial specialized

technical education and experience. They have varying degrees of under-  
 standing of parts of the system but potential access to most of it. They  
 often have highly sophisticated tools and instruments for analysis.

3. Class 3 attackers – ‘funded organizations’ – are able to assemble teams of

specialists with related and complementary skills backed by great funding  
 resources. They are capable of in-depth analysis of the system, designing  
 sophisticated attacks, and using the most advanced analysis tools. They  
 may use Class 2 adversaries as part of the attack team.

Within this scheme, the typical microcontroller is aimed at blocking clever

outsiders; the early 4753 aimed at stopping knowledgeable insiders, and the 4758  
 was aimed at (and certiﬁed for) blocking funded organizations. By the way, this  
 classiﬁcation is becoming a bit dated; we see class 1 attackers renting access to  
 class 3 equipment. And class 3 attackers nowadays are not just national labs,  
 but your commercial competitors and even university security teams. In our  
 case, we have people with backgrounds in maths, physics, software and banking,  
 and we’ve had friendly manufacturers giving us samples of their competitors’  
 products for us to break.

The FIPS certiﬁcation scheme is operated by laboratories licensed by the

US government. The original 1994 standard, FIPS 140-1, set out four levels of  
 protection, with level 4 being the highest, and this remained in the next version,  
 FIPS 140-2, which was introduced in 2001. There was a huge gap between level  
 4 and level 3; devices at that level were often easy for experts to attack. In fact,  
 the original paper on evaluation by IBM engineers proposed six levels [2001];  
 the FIPS standard adopted the ﬁrst three of these as its levels 1–3, and the  
 proposed level 6 as its level 4 (the 4758 designer Steve Weingart tells the story  
 in [2000]). The gap, commonly referred to as level 3.5 or 3+, is where many of  
 the better commercial systems were aimed from the 1990s through 2019. Such  
 equipment attempts to keep out the class 1 attack community, while making life  
 hard for class 2 and expensive for class 3.

There was about a decade of consultation about whether to abandon FIPS

140 in favour of ISO 19790 – a move supported by vendors, particularly those

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*18.5. SMARTCARDS AND OTHER SECURITY CHIPS*

outside the USA. Critics of the FIPS approach noted that it didn’t cover non-  
 invasive security such as bu↵er overﬂows and API attacks; that its concept of  
 roles was tied to human actors in companies, rather than other system com-  
 ponents; that it failed to cover some methods of side-channel analysis; that it  
 was generally aimed at outdated technology; that the FIPS standard includes  
 the dual elliptic curve deterministic random bit generator, known to contain  
 an NSA backdoor; and that it was changed too often by NIST issuing im-  
 plementation guidelines, rather than by updating the standard regularly [1410].  
 Eventually, the US Department of Commerce gave up and approved an updated  
 version, FIPS 140-3, which simply refers to the ISO standards 19790:2012 and  
 24759:2017, and speciﬁes some reﬁnements. This came into force in September  
 2019 and in 2021 testing under FIPS 140-2 will cease.

**18.5** **Smartcards and other security chips**

While there are tens of thousands of HSMs in use, there are billions of self-  
 contained one-chip crypto modules containing nonvolatile memory, I/O, usually  
 a CPU, often some specialised logic, and mechanisms to protect memory from  
 being read out. Most are packaged as cards, while some look like physical keys.  
 They range from transport tickets at the low end, through smartcards and the  
 TPMs that now ship with most computers and phones, up to pay-TV cards  
 and accessory control chips designed to withstand attack by capable motivated  
 opponents for as long as possible.

Many attacks have been developed; we already discussed the consequences

of the breaks of the Mifare cards and car keys. Pay-TV subscriber cards in  
 particular have been subjected to intensive attacks as they often have a universal  
 shared secret key, so a compromise enables an attacker to make lots of counterfeit  
 cards, while a break of a bank smartcard only lets the attacker loot that speciﬁc  
 bank account. The accessory control chips in printer cartridges also protect a  
 lot of ‘value’, and have driven real innovation in both attack and defence. In  
 this section, I’ll tell the story of how chip-level security evolved.

**18.5.1** **History**

Smartcards were developed in France from the mid-70s to mid-80s; for the early  
 history, see [832]. From the late 1980s, they started to be used at scale, initially  
 as the *subscriber identity modules* (SIMs) in GSM mobile phones and as sub-  
 scriber cards for satellite-TV stations. They started being used as bank cards  
 in France and South Africa in 1994, followed by trials in the UK and Norway;  
 this led to the EMV standard I mentioned in the chapter on banking and book-  
 keeping, with deployment in the rest of Europe from 2003 and the USA from  
 about 2015.

A smartcard is a self-contained microcontroller, with a microprocessor, mem-

ory and a serial interface integrated in a single chip and packaged in a plastic  
 card. Smartcards used in banking use a standard-size bank card, while in mod-  
 ern mobile phones a much smaller size is used. Smartcard chips are also packaged  
 in other ways. In the STU-III secure telephones used in the US government from

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1987–2009, each user had a ‘crypto ignition key’, packaged to look and feel like  
 a physical key; some prepayment electricity meters and pay-TV set-top boxes  
 used the same approach. The TPM chips built into computer motherboards  
 to support trusted boot are basically smartcard chips with an added parallel  
 port, so the TPM can verify that the right software is being used to start up  
 the computer. Contactless smartcards contain a smartcard chip plus a wire-  
 loop antenna; most car keys are a slightly more complex version of the same  
 idea, with an added battery to give greater range. In what follows I’ll mostly  
 disregard the packaging form factor and just refer to single-chip cryptographic  
 modules as ‘smartcards’ or ‘chipcards’.

Apart from bank cards, the single most widespread application is the mobile

phone SIM. The handsets are personalized for each user by the SIM, which  
 contains the key with which you authenticate yourself to the network. The

strategy of using a cheap card to personalise a more expensive electronic device  
 is found in other applications from pay-TV set-top boxes to smart meters. The  
 device can be manufactured in bulk for global markets, while each subscriber  
 gets a card to pay for service. The cards can also be replaced relatively quickly  
 and cheaply in the event of a successful attack.

**18.5.2** **Architecture**

The typical smartcard consists of a single die of up to 25 square millimeters of  
 silicon containing a microprocessor (larger dies are more likely to break as the  
 card is ﬂexed). Cheap products have an 8-bit processor such as an 8051 or 6805,  
 and the more expensive products have either a modular multiplication circuit  
 to do public-key cryptography, or a 32-bit processor such as an Arm, or indeed  
 both (hardware crypto is easier to protect against side-channel attacks). The  
 high-end ones also tend to have a hardware random number generator. There’s  
 also serial I/O and a hierarchy of memory – ROM or Flash to hold the program  
 and immutable data, Flash or EEPROM to hold customer data such as the  
 user’s account number, crypto keys, PIN retry counters and value counters; and  
 RAM to hold transient data during computation.

The memory is limited by the standards of normal computers; outside the

device, the only connections are for power, reset, a clock and a serial port. The  
 physical, electrical and low-level logical connections, together with a ﬁle-system-  
 like access protocol, are speciﬁed in ISO 7816. There are several main software  
 architectures on o↵er, including at the bottom end the *Application Programming*  
 *Data Units* (APDUs) deﬁned by ISO 7816 which allow a reader to invoke speciﬁc  
 applications directly, through the Multos operating system to JavaCard, where  
 the card can run apps written in a subset of the Java language, and which you  
 (and your opponents in the underground) can use to code up custom apps2.  
 You can even buy overlay SIMs – smartcards 160 microns thick, with contacts  
 top and bottom, which you can program in JavaCard to carry out middleperson  
 attacks on other smartcards (you stick the overlay on top of the target device).

2JavaCard has quietly become one of the most widely deployed operating systems in the

world with over 6 billion cards sold [1250].

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**18.5.3** **Security evolution**

When I ﬁrst heard a sales pitch from a smartcard vendor – in 1986 when I was  
 working as a banker – I asked how come the device was secure. I was assured  
 that since the machinery needed to make the card cost $20m, just as for making  
 banknotes, the system must be secure. I didn’t believe this but didn’t have  
 the time or the tools to prove the claim wrong. I later learned from industry  
 executives that none of their customers were prepared to pay for serious security  
 until about 1995, and so until then they relied on the small size of the devices,  
 the obscurity of their design, and the inaccessibility of chip testing tools to make  
 attacks more di�cult. In any case, so long as they were only used for SIM cards,  
 there were no capable motivated opponents. All I can achieve by hacking my  
 SIM card is the ability to charge calls to my own account.

The application that changed this was satellite TV. TV operators broadcast

their signals over a large footprint – such as all of Europe – and give each  
 subscriber a card to compute the keys needed to decipher the channels they’ve  
 paid for. Since the operators had usually only bought the rights to the movies  
 for one or two countries, they couldn’t sell subscriber cards elsewhere. This  
 created a black market, into which forged cards could be sold. A critical factor  
 was that ‘Star Trek’, which people in Europe had picked up from UK satellite  
 broadcasts for years, was suddenly encrypted in 1993. In some countries, such  
 as Germany, it wasn’t available legally at any price. This motivated a lot of keen  
 young computer science and engineering students to look for vulnerabilities. A  
 further factor was that some countries, notably Ireland and Canada, didn’t have  
 laws yet against selling forged pay-TV cards; Canada didn’t do this until 2002.  
 So hackers could sell their wares openly.

This rapidly had knock-on e↵ects. The ﬁrst large ﬁnancial fraud reported

to involve a cloned smartcard was about a year later, in February/March 1995.  
 The perpetrator targeted a card used to give Portuguese farmers rebates on  
 fuel, conspiring with petrol stations who registered other fuel sales to the bogus  
 cards in return for a share of the proceeds. The proceeds were reported to have  
 been about $30m [1330].

**How to hack a smartcard (1)**

The earliest hacks targeted the protocols rather than the cards themselves.

For example, some early pay-TV systems gave each customer a card with access  
 to all channels, and then sent messages over the air to cancel those channels  
 to which the customer hadn’t subscribed after an introductory period. This  
 opened an attack in which a device was inserted between the smartcard and  
 the decoder to intercept and discard any messages addressed to the card. So  
 you could cancel your subscription without the vendor being able to cancel your  
 service. The same kind of attack was launched on the German phone card

system, with handmade chip cards sold in brothels and in hostels for asylum  
 seekers [1813, 184].

**How to hack a smartcard (2)**

As smartcards use an external power supply, and store security state such as

crypto keys and value counters in EEPROM, an attacker could freeze the EEP-

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ROM contents by removing the programming voltage, *VP P* . Early smartcards  
 received *VP P* from the card reader on a dedicated contact. So by covering this  
 contact with sticky tape, cardholders could prevent a value counter from being  
 decremented. With some payphone chipcards, this gave inﬁnite units.

The ﬁx was to generate *VP P* internally from the supply voltage *VCC* using a

voltage multiplier. However, this isn’t foolproof as the circuit can be destroyed  
 by an attacker, for example with a laser shot. As well as bypassing value controls,  
 they can also bypass a PIN retry counter and try every possible PIN, one after  
 another. So a prudent programmer won’t just ask for a customer PIN and

decrement the counter if it fails. You decrement the counter, check it, get the  
 PIN, verify it, and if it’s correct then increment the counter again3.

**How to hack a smartcard (3)**

Another early attack was to read the voltages on the chip surface using a

scanning electron microscope (SEM). The low-cost SEMs found in universities  
 back then couldn’t do voltage contrast microscopy at more than a few tens of  
 kilohertz, so attackers would slow down the clock. In one card, attackers found  
 they read out RAM contents with a suitable transaction after reset, as working  
 memory wasn’t zeroized.

Modern smartcard processors have a watchdog timer or other circuit to de-

tect low clock frequency and reset the card, or else use dynamic logic. And the  
 attacker could sometimes single-step the program by repeatedly resetting the  
 card and clocking it *n* times, then *n*+1 times, and so on. But as with burglar  
 alarms, there’s a trade-o↵ between false alarms and missed alarms. Cheap card  
 readers can have wild ﬂuctuations in clock frequency when a card is powered  
 up, causing many false alarms. Eventually, cards acquired an internal clock.

**How to hack a smartcard (4)**

Once pay-TV operators had blocked the easy attacks, pirates turned to phys-

ical probing. Early smartcards had no protection against physical tampering  
 except the microscopic scale of the circuit, a thin glass *passivation layer* on the  
 surface of the chip, and potting which is typically some kind of epoxy. Tech-  
 niques for depackaging chips are well known, and discussed in detail in standard  
 works on semiconductor testing, such as [197]. In most cases, a milliliter of  
 fuming nitric acid is more than enough to dissolve the epoxy.

*Probing stations* consist of microscopes with micromanipulators attached for

landing ﬁne probes on the surface of the chip. They are used in the semiconduc-  
 tor industry for testing production-line samples, and can be bought second-hand  
 (see Figure 18.4). They may have specialized accessories, such as a laser to shoot  
 holes in the chip’s passivation layer.

The usual target of a probing attack is the processor’s bus. If the bus tra�c

can be recorded, this gives a trace of the program’s operation. (It was once a  
 recommended industry practice for the card to compute a checksum on memory  
 immediately after reset – giving a complete listing of all code and data.) So

3Such *defensive programming* was common in the early days of computing, when computers

used valves rather than transistors and used to break down every few hours. Back then, if  
 you masked o↵ three bits, you’d check the result was no more than seven, just to make sure.

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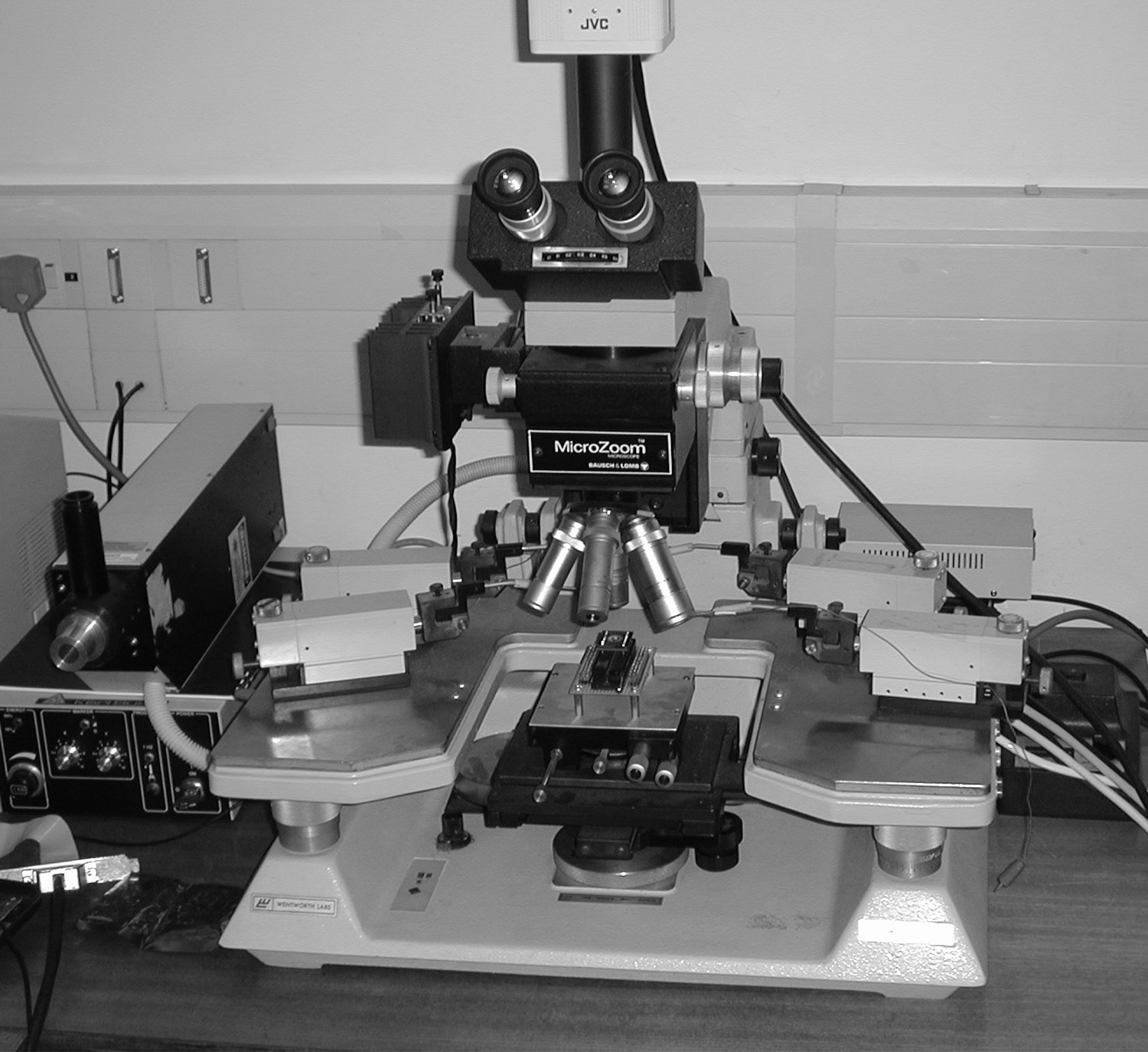


Figure 18.4: – our probing station

the attacker will ﬁnd the bus and expose it for probing (see Figure 18.5). If the  
 chip is using algorithms like AES and RSA, then unless there’s some defense  
 mechanism that masks the computation, a trace from even a single bus line will  
 be enough to reconstruct the key [860].

The ﬁrst defense used by the pay-TV card industry was to endow each card

with multiple keys or algorithms, and arrange things so that only those in current  
 use would appear on the processor bus. Whenever pirate cards appeared on the  
 market, a command would be issued over the air to cause legitimate cards to  
 activate new keys or algorithms from previously unused memory. In this way,  
 the pirates’ customers would su↵er a loss of service until the attack could be  
 repeated and new pirate cards or updates could be distributed [2064].

**How to hack a smartcard (5)**

This strategy was defeated by Oliver K¨ommerling’s *memory linearization*

*attack* in which the analyst damages the chip’s instruction decoder in such a  
 way that instructions such as jumps and calls – which change the program  
 address other than by incrementing it – are broken [1078]. One way to do this  
 is to drop a grounded microprobe needle on the control line to the instruction  
 latch, so that whatever instruction happens to be there on power-up is executed  
 repeatedly. The memory contents can now be read o↵ the bus. In fact, once

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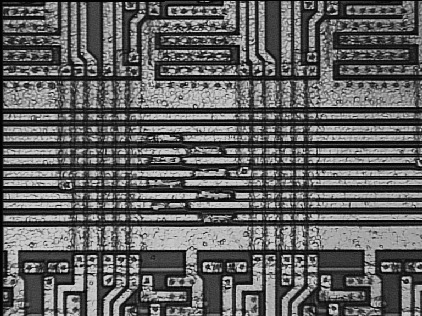


Figure 18.5: – the data bus of an ST16 smartcard prepared for probing by  
 excavating eight trenches through the passivation layer with laser shots (Photo  
 courtesy Oliver K¨ommerling)

some of the device’s ROM and EEPROM is understood, the attacker can skip  
 over unwanted instructions and cause the device to execute only instructions of  
 their choice. So with a single probing needle, they can get the card to execute  
 arbitrary code, and in theory could get it to output its secret key material on  
 the serial port. This can be thought of as an early version of the return-oriented  
 programming attack. But probing the memory contents o↵ the bus is usually  
 more convenient.

There are often several places in the instruction decoder where a grounded

needle will prevent programmed changes in the control ﬂow. So even if it isn’t  
 fully understood, memory linearization can often be achieved by trial and error.  
 One particularly vulnerable smartcard family was the Hitachi H8/300 architec-  
 ture, which had a 16-bit bus with the property that if the most signiﬁcant bit  
 equals 1 then the CPU will always execute single-cycle instructions without any  
 branches. So by shooting the MSB bus line with a laser, the memory could be  
 easily read out [1781]. Other CPUs based on RISC cores also tend to su↵er from  
 this. Some of the more modern processors have traps which prevent memory  
 linearization, such as watchdog timers that reset the card unless they themselves  
 are reset every few thousand instructions.

Memory linearization is an example of a *fault induction attack*. There are

many other examples. Faults can be injected into processors in many ways,  
 from hardware probing through power transients and laser illumination. One  
 common target is the test circuitry. A typical chip has a self-test routine in  
 ROM that is executed in the factory and allows all the memory contents to

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be read and veriﬁed. In some cases, a fuse is blown in the chip to stop an

attacker using the facility. But the attacker can cause a fault in this mechanism  
 – whether by ﬂipping a bit in Flash memory [1776], or just ﬁnding the fuse and  
 bridging it with two probing needles [302]. In other cases, the test routine is  
 protected with a password, which can be found [1775].

We noted in section 5.7.1 that the RSA algorithm is fragile in the presence

of failure; one laser shot is all it takes to cause a signature to be right modulo  
 *p* and wrong modulo *q*, enabling the attacker to factor the key *pq*. Adi Shamir  
 pointed out that if a CPU has an error in its multiply unit – even just a single  
 computation *ab* = *c* whose result is returned consistently wrong in a single bit –  
 then you can design an RSA ciphertext for decryption (or an RSA plaintext for  
 signature) so that the computation will be done correctly mod *p* but incorrectly  
 mod *q*, again enabling you to factor the key [1705]. So a careful programmer will  
 always check the results of critical computations, and think hard about what  
 error messages might disclose.

**How to hack a smartcard (6)**

The next thing the pay-TV card industry tried was to incorporate hardware

cryptographic processors, in order to force attackers to reconstruct hardware  
 circuits rather than simply clone software, and to force them to use more ex-  
 pensive processors in their pirate cards. In the ﬁrst such implementation, the  
 crypto processor was a separate chip packaged into the card, and it had an inter-  
 esting protocol failure: it would always work out the key needed to decrypt the  
 current video stream, and then pass it to the CPU which would decide whether  
 or not to pass it on to the outside world. Hackers just tapped the wire between  
 the two chips.

The next version had the crypto hardware built into the CPU itself. Where

this consists of just a few thousand gates, an attacker can trace the circuit  
 manually from micrographs. But with larger gate counts and deep submicron  
 processes, a successful attack needs serious tools: you need to etch or grind away  
 the layers of the chip, take electron micrographs, and use image processing  
 software to reconstruct the circuit [269]. Equipment can now be rented and  
 circuit-reconstruction software can be bought; the short resource now is skilled  
 reverse engineers.

By the late 1990s, some pirates had started to get commercial reverse-

engineering labs to reconstruct chips for them. Such labs get much of their

business from analyzing integrated circuits on behalf of chip makers’ competi-  
 tors, looking for patent infringements. They also reverse chips used for accessory  
 control, as doing this for compatibility rather than piracy is lawful. Many labs  
 were located in Canada, where copying pay-TV cards wasn’t a crime until 2002  
 (though there were at least two cases where these labs were sued by pay-TV op-  
 erators). Some labs are now in China, whose legal system is harder for outsiders  
 to navigate.

**How to hack a smartcard (7)**

In 1995 STM pioneered a new defence, a protective shield on the chip surface.

This was a serpentine sensor line, zig-zagging round ground lines in a top metal

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layer. Any break or short would be sensed as soon as the chip was powered up,  
 whereupon the chip would overwrite the keys.

Sensor mesh shields can really push up the cost of an attack. One bypass

is to hold the sensor line to *VDD* with a needle, but this can be fragile; and  
 other vendors have multiple sensor lines with real signals on them. So if you  
 cut them, you have to repair them, and the tool for the job is the *Focused*  
 *Ion Beam Workstation* (FIB). This is a device similar to a scanning electron  
 microscope but which uses a beam of ions instead of electrons. By varying the  
 beam current, it can be used either as a microscope or as a milling machine, with  
 a useful resolution under 10 nanometers. By introducing a gas that’s broken  
 down by the ion beam, you can lay down either conductors or insulators with  
 a precision of a few tens of nanometers. For a detailed description of FIBs and  
 other semiconductor test equipment that can be used in reverse engineering,  
 see [1233].

FIBs are so useful in all sorts of applications, from semiconductor testing

through metallurgy and forensics to nanotechnology, that they are widely avail-  
 able in physics and material-science labs, and can be rented for about a hundred  
 dollars an hour.

Given such a tool, it is straightforward to attack a shield that is not powered

up. The direct approach is to drill a hole through the mesh to the metal line that  
 carries the desired signal, ﬁll it up with insulator, drill another hole through the  
 center of the insulator, ﬁll it with metal, and plate a contact on top – typically  
 a platinum ‘X’ a few microns wide, which you then contact with a needle from  
 your probing station (see Figure 18.6). There are many more tricks, such as  
 using the voltage contrast and backscatter modes of your electron microscope  
 to work out exactly where to cut, so you can disable a whole section of the mesh.  
 John Walker has a video tutorial on how to use these tricks to defeat a shield  
 at [1975]

Many other defenses can force the attacker to do more work. Some chips

have protective coatings of silicon carbide or boron nitride, which can force the  
 FIB operator to go slowly rather than damage the chip through a build-up of  
 electrical charge. Chips with protective coatings are on display at the NSA

Museum at Fort Meade, Maryland.

**How to hack a smartcard (8)**

In 1998, the smartcard industry was shaken when Paul Kocher announced a

new attack known as *di↵erential power analysis* (DPA). This relies on the fact  
 that di↵erent instructions consume di↵erent amounts of power, so by measuring  
 the current drawn by a chip it was possible to extract the key. Smartcard makers  
 had known since the 1980s that this was theoretically possible, and had even  
 patented some crude countermeasures. But Paul came up with e�cient signal  
 processing techniques that made it easy, and which I’ll describe in the following  
 chapter. He came up with even simpler attacks based on timing; if cryptographic  
 operations don’t take the same number of clock cycles, this can leak key material  
 too4. Power and timing attacks are examples of *side-channel attacks*, where the

4On larger processors, it can be even worse; a number of researchers developed attacks on

crypto algorithms such as AES based on cache misses during the 2000s, and in 2018 we had  
 the Spectre and Meltdown attacks that exploit transient execution. See the chapter on side

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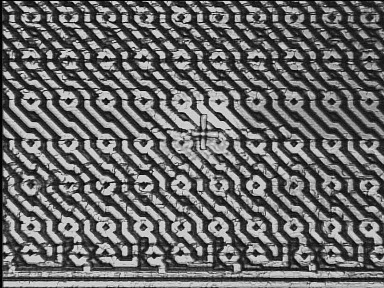


Figure 18.6: – the protective mesh of an ST16 smartcard with a FIB cross for  
 probing the bus line visible underneath (Photo courtesy Oliver K¨ommerling)

opponent can observe some extra information about the processor’s state during  
 a cryptographic computation. All the smartcards on the market in 1998 turned  
 out to be highly vulnerable to DPA, and this held up the industry’s development  
 for a couple of years while countermeasures were developed.

Attacks were traditionally classed as either *invasive attacks* such as mechan-

ical probing, which involves penetrating the passivation layer, and *noninvasive*  
 *attacks* such as power analysis, which leaves the card untouched. Noninvasive  
 attacks can be further classiﬁed into local attacks where the opponent needs ac-  
 cess to the device, as with power analysis; and remote attacks where she could  
 be anywhere, such as timing attacks. But that was not the whole story.

**How to hack a smartcard (9)**

Mechanical probing techniques have been getting steadily harder because

of shrinking feature sizes. The next attack technology to develop was optical  
 probing. The ﬁrst report was from Sandia National Laboratories who in 1995  
 described a way to read out a voltage directly using a laser [32]. Since 2001  
 optical probing has been developed into an e↵ective and low-cost technology,  
 largely by my Cambridge colleague Sergei Skorobogatov. In 2002 Sergei and I  
 reported using a photographic ﬂashgun, mounted on the microscope of a probing  
 station, to induce transient faults in selected transistors of an IC [1782]. The  
 light ionises the silicon, causing transistors to conduct. Once you understand  
 photoconductivity and learn to focus the light on single transistors, by upgrad-  
 ing from a ﬂashgun to a laser, this enables many direct attacks. For example,

channels.

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microcontrollers can be opened by toggling the ﬂip-ﬂop that latches their pro-  
 tection state. This gave a new way of causing not just transient fault attacks,  
 as on fragile cryptosystems such as RSA, but faults that are precisely directed  
 and controlled in both space and time.

Later in 2002, Sergei reported using a laser mounted on the same cheap

microscope to read out a microcontroller’s memory directly. The basic idea is  
 simple: if you shine a laser on a transistor, that will induce a photocurrent and  
 increase the device’s power consumption – unless it was conducting already. So  
 by scanning the laser across the device, you map which transistors are o↵ and  
 which are on. We developed this into a reasonably dependable way of reading  
 out ﬂip-ﬂops and RAM memory [1648]. We named our attack *semi-invasive*  
 *analysis* as it lies between the existing categories of invasive and non-invasive.  
 It’s not invasive, as we don’t break the passivation; but we do remove the epoxy,  
 so it doesn’t count as non-invasive either.

Optical probing from the front side of the chip remained the state of the art

for about ﬁve years. By the time of this book’s second edition (2007), smartcard  
 vendors were using 0.18 and 0.13 micron processes, typically with seven metal  
 layers. Direct optical probe attacks from the chip surface had become di�cult,  
 not so much because of the feature size but because the metal layers get in  
 the way. In addition, the sheer size and complexity of the chips was making  
 it di�cult to know where to aim. The di�culty was increased by *glue logic* –  
 essentially randomised place-and-route.

Older chips have clearly distinguishable blocks, and quite a lot can be learned

about their structure and organisation just by looking. Bus lines could be picked  
 out and targeted for attack. However, the SX28 in Figure 18.7 just looks like a  
 random sea of gates. The only easily distinguishable features are the EEPROM  
 (at top left) and the RAM (at top right). It takes some work to ﬁnd the CPU,  
 the instruction decoder and the bus.

I wrote in the second edition, “The two current windows of vulnerability are

the memory and the rear side.” These have provided our Tamper Lab’s main  
 research targets during the decade since.

**How to hack a smartcard (10)**

Rear-side attacks are the practical semi-invasive option once you get below

0.35*µ*. You go through the back of the chip using an infrared laser at a wave-  
 length around 1.1*µ* where silicon is transparent. For feature sizes below 65nm,  
 you need to thin down the chip to 2–5*µ* using some combination of mechanical  
 polishing and chemical etching; and there are now special methods to improve  
 the resolution, such as silicon immersion lenses. One physical limit is you can’t  
 get a bandwidth of much over a few MHz because of the time taken for the  
 charge carriers to recombine.

Rear-side attacks can sometimes be used to extract ROM contents by direct

observation, but the main technique is optical fault induction (OFI), which has  
 now become a standard security test procedure. Silicon immersion lenses have  
 enabled OFI attacks to continue to create single-event upsets down to 28nm  
 silicon, even though the laser spot size is about a micron [593]. Most smartcards  
 current in 2019 tend to use about 90nm with the smallest about 65nm [1862].  
 The three big vendors have all announced 40nm products. So OFI will continue

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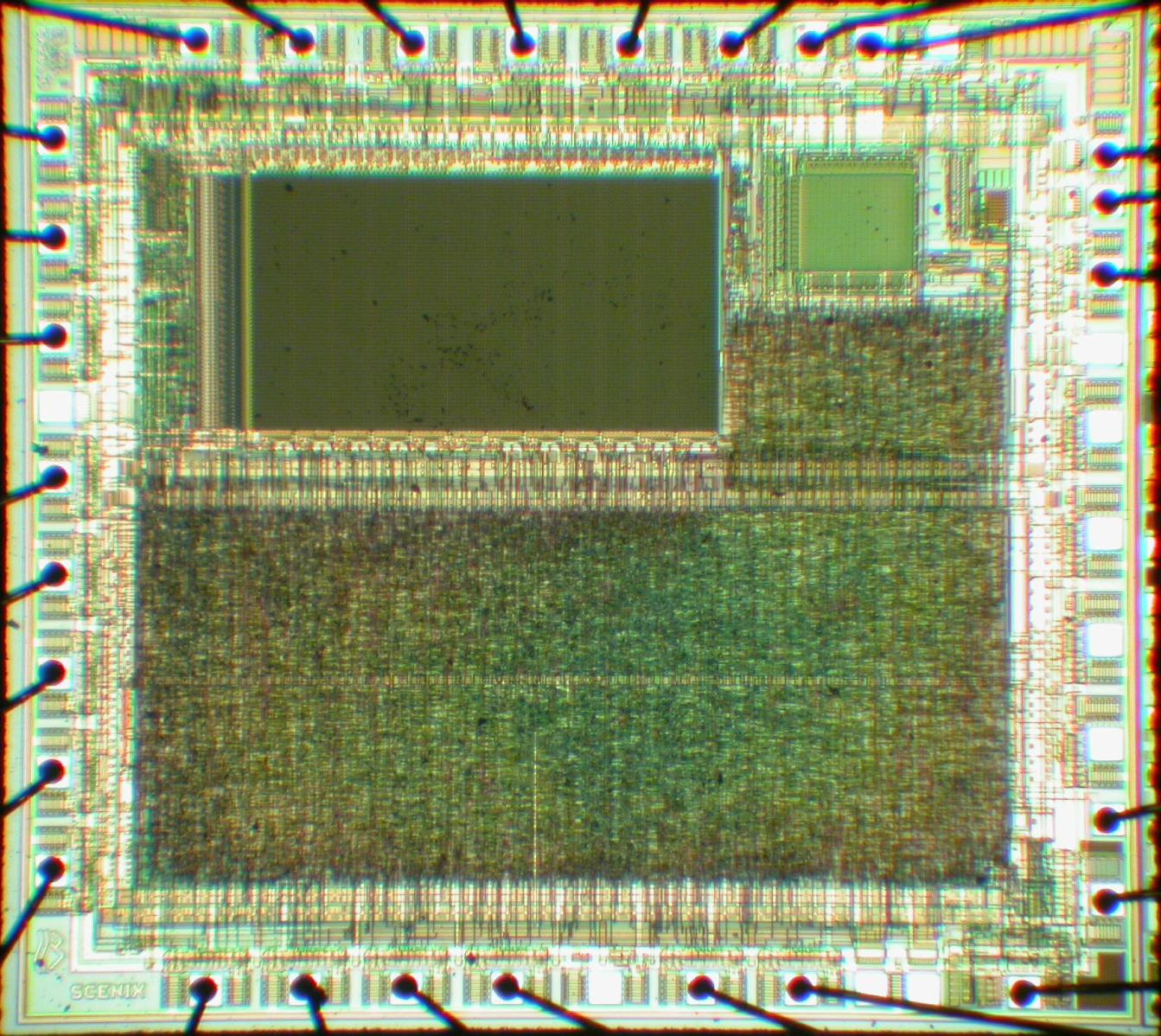


Figure 18.7: – SX28 microcontroller with ‘glue logic’ (courtesy of Sergei Sko-  
 robogatov)

to be practical for some time.

With the smaller feature sizes, you have to accept that your aim in both

space and time will often be fuzzy, and you may use the laser in combination  
 with another more precise technique. One starting point here was optically-  
 enhanced position-locked power analysis. By illuminating the *n* channels of

a memory cell, the signal observed from a state change by power analysis is  
 increased; with higher light levels, even read accesses can be detected. This  
 enables much more selective analysis [1771].

**How to hack a smartcard (11)**

By 2010, the logic in most security chips was glue logic with few discernible

features, but since Flash memory needs high voltages and large charge pumps,  
 Flash arrays are large and easily identiﬁable. Chipmakers worried that the

attacks that targeted chips with a separate *VP P* programming voltage might be  
 reinvented by using a laser to interfere with the charge pumps. So they tried to  
 stop both memory corruption and the exploitation of memory readback access  
 by making secure Flash with a per-block verify-only operation when memory is  
 written. Sergei’s *bumping attack* was inspired by the bumping attacks on locks  
 described in chapter 13. Just as lock bumping forces cylinders into a desired  
 state, so Flash bumping forces bus lines into a desired state as they report the  
 results of memory veriﬁcation [1774].

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But perhaps the most signiﬁcant recent breakthrough was in 2016, when

Franck Courbon, Sergei Skorobogatov and Chris Woods discovered how to use  
 the latest generation of scanning electron microscopes to automate the direct  
 read-out of Flash and EEPROM. As the memory cells store a bit by the presence  
 or absence of a few hundred electrons in a ﬂoating gate, it’s tricky to read them  
 out without using the circuits designed for the purpose – especially when using  
 a beam consisting of billions of electrons, aimed through the rear side of the  
 chip. (We used to compare this with reading a palimpsest with a blowlamp.)  
 Making it work requires very careful sample preparation, a SEM that supports  
 passive voltage contrast (PVC), ﬁne-tuned scan acquisition and e�cient image  
 processing [480]. Using such tools and techniques, it’s now possible to read out  
 the 256K of Flash or EEPROM from a typical smartcard or other security chip  
 with perhaps half a dozen single-bit errors. This had been predicted as long  
 ago as 2000 by Steve Weingart, the 4758 designer [1999]; PVC made it a reality.  
 The e↵ect on the smartcard industry is that the entire memory of the chip can  
 now be read out. Reverse engineering is a matter of ﬁguring out the CPU’s  
 instruction set, how the memory is encrypted, and so on.

**How to hack a smartcard (12)**

Reverse engineering services in China now charge 30c per gate, so the brute-

force approach is to just reverse the whole chip and drop it in a simulator without  
 trying to understand it in detail. Given that a typical smartcard has 100,000  
 gates, this means you can get a simulator for $30,000. Then you have all sorts  
 of options. Once you have su�ciently understood one card of a particular type,  
 the per-card cloning cost is now the cost of memory extraction. You can also  
 use the simulation to look for side-channel attacks, to plan FIB edits, or to fuzz  
 the device and look for other vulnerabitities.

As smartcards are computers, they can sometimes fall to the usual computer

attacks, such as stack overwriting by sending too long a string of parameters. As  
 early as 1996, the Mondex card, used in a payment trial by the UK’s NatWest  
 Bank, boasted a formally veriﬁed operating system. Yet as late as 2019, software  
 attacks worked against at least one SIM card. Malicious SMSes were used by  
 nation-state attackers to download malware into the SIMs of target users so  
 that their location could be tracked [575].

**18.5.4** **Random number generators and PUFs**

Many crypto chips are o↵ered with a random number generator, a physical  
 unclonable function, or both.

Hardware random number generators (RNGs) are used to produce proto-

col nonces and session keys. Weak generators have led to many catastrophic  
 security failures, of which a number pop up in this book. Poor nonces lead  
 to replay attacks, while weak session keys can compromise long-term signing  
 keys in cryptographic algorithms such as ECDSA. During the 1990s, the fash-  
 ion was for algorithmic random number generation; this is properly known as  
 a *pseudorandom number generator* (PRNG). A crypto chip might have had a  
 special key-generation key that was used in counter encryption mode; operating  
 systems often had something similar. However, if the counter is reset, then the

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output is repeated; there have been several variants on this theme. I also men-  
 tioned the NIST Dual-EC-DRBG, which was built into Windows and seemed to  
 have contained an NSA trapdoor [1734]; Ed Snowden later conﬁrmed that the  
 NSA paid RSA $10m to use this standard in tools that many tech companies  
 licensed [1290].

Hardware random number generators typically quantise jitter or use some

source of metastability such as a cross-coupled inverter pair. Such generators  
 are notoriously di�cult to test; faults can be induced by external noise such  
 as temperature, supply voltage and radiation. Standards such as NIST SP800-  
 A/B/C call for RNG output to be run through test circuits. Crypto products  
 often mix together the randomness from a number of sources both environmental  
 and internal [838], and this is a requirement for the highest levels of certiﬁcation.  
 The way these sources are combined is often the critical thing and one should  
 beware of designs that try to be too clever [1033]. One must also beware that  
 hardware RNGs are usually proprietary, obscure designs, sometimes speciﬁc to  
 a single fab, so it’s hard to check that the design is sound, let alone that it  
 doesn’t contain a subtle backdoor. An example of conservative design may be  
 that used in Intel chips since 2012, which combines both a hardware RNG and  
 a software PRNG that follows it [856].

The manufacture of crypto chips typically involves a personalisation stage

where serial numbers and crypto keys are loaded into Flash or EEPROM. This  
 is another attack point: Ed Snowden reported that GCHQ had hacked the  
 mechanisms used by Gemalto to personalise cards, and got copies of the keys in  
 millions of SIMs. So one might ask whether chips could be manufactured with  
 an intrinsic key that would never leave the device. Each chip would create a  
 private key and export the public key, which the vendor would certify during  
 personalisation. But this takes time, and also seems to need an RNG on the  
 chip. Is there another way?

A physical unclonable function (PUF) is a means of identifying a device

from variations that occur naturally during manufacture. In the 1980s, Sandia  
 National Laboratories were asked by the US Federal Reserve whether it was  
 possible to make unforgeable banknote paper, and they came up with the idea  
 of chopping up optical ﬁbre into the mash, so you could recognise each note by  
 a unique speckle pattern [1746]. Such a mechanism should be unclonable, and  
 its behaviour should change detectably if it’s tampered with. Could something  
 similar be devised for integrated circuits? In 2000, Oliver and Fritz K¨ommerling  
 proposed loading chip packaging with metal ﬁbres and measuring its properties  
 to generate a key with which the chip contents would be encrypted, so that  
 drilling through the packaging would destroy the key [1079]. In 2002 Blaise

Gassend, Dwaine Clarke, Marten Van Dijk and Srini Devadas proposed using  
 process variability in the silicon itself, suggesting that a collection of ring os-  
 cillators might be chaotic enough to be unique [754]. There followed the usual  
 coevolution of attack and defence as people proposed designs and others broke  
 them.

Through the 2010s we’ve started to see PUFs appearing in signiﬁcant num-

bers of low-cost chips as well as in higher-value products such as FPGAs. The  
 typical ‘weak PUF’ generates a consistent random number on power-up from  
 process variability; an SRAM PUF reads the initial state of some SRAM cells

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and is used, with error correction, as a stable random ID or as an AES key to  
 encrypt memory or to drive a PRNG. If your opponent is capable of reversing  
 your circuit and scanning your Flash memory, a PUF may at least force them  
 to go to the trouble of probing the key o↵ the bus, or inducing faults one bus  
 line at a time to read it out using di↵erential fault analysis.

PUF marketing often claims much more, and one claim (as well as a research

goal) is a ‘strong PUF’ which would act as a hardware challenge-response mech-  
 anism. Given an input, it would return an output that would be su�ciently  
 di↵erent for each chip (and each input) to be usable as a cryptographic primi-  
 tive in itself. For example, one might send a thousand challenges to the chip at  
 personalisation and store the responses for later key updating. Note that this  
 would not of itself have stopped the NSA attack on Gemalto, as they hacked the  
 personalisation ﬁles and if PUFs had been used they’d have got the challenge-  
 response pair ﬁles too.

The state of the art in 2020 appears to be *XOR arbiter PUFs*, which consist

of a chain of multiplexers followed by an arbiter. The challenge to the PUF is  
 input to the address lines of the multiplexers which select a route for signals  
 to race through them to get to the arbiter. To make it harder for an attacker  
 to work out the relative delay on each circuit path, the outputs of a number of  
 arbiters are XORed together. However Fatemeh Ganji, Shahin Tajik and Jean-  
 Pierre Seifert have shown that suitable machine-learning techniques can be used  
 to model the underlying circuits [745]. The same authors worked with Heiko  
 Lohrke and Christian Boit to develop laser fault induction attacks, guided by the  
 chip’s optical emissions, that disable some arbiters so that others can be learned  
 more quickly, and thus signiﬁcantly reduce the PUFs’ entropy [1859]. There are  
 always probing attacks, as some routine on the chip has to be able to read  
 the PUF for it to do any work, and this means the bootloader or the monitor.  
 As these are often left open to parts of the supply chain for personalisation,  
 warranty and upgrade purposes, it’s hard to see what extra protection such  
 devices would give, even if we could invent one that works properly. Also, using  
 such devices at scale would tend to make personalisation slower and protocols  
 more complex. Finally, the strength of a PUF depends on variation that the  
 fab tries its best to eliminate, so a change in silicon process can suddenly make  
 a PUF design insecure.

**18.5.5** **Larger chips**

There’s a growing number of larger chips with embedded security functions, typ-  
 ically aimed at manufacturing control or accessory control. The granddaddy of  
 these products may be the *Clipper chip*, which the Clinton administration pro-  
 posed in 1993 as a replacement for DES. Also known as the *Escrowed Encryption*  
 *Standard* (EES), this was a tamper-resistant chip containing the Skipjack block  
 cipher and a protocol designed to allow the FBI to decrypt any tra�c encrypted  
 using it. When a user supplied Clipper with some plaintext and a key to encrypt  
 it, the chip returned not just the ciphertext but also a *Law Enforcement Access*  
 *Field* (LEAF) which contained the user-supplied key encrypted under an FBI  
 key embedded in the device. To prevent people cheating by sending the wrong  
 LEAF with a message, the LEAF had a MAC computed with a ‘family key’

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shared by all Clipper chips – which had to be tamper-resistant to keep both the  
 Skipjack block cipher and the LEAF family key secret.

As often happens, it wasn’t the tamper-resistance that failed, but the proto-

col. Almost as soon as Clipper hit the market, Matt Blaze found a vulnerability:  
 as the MAC used to bind the LEAF to the message was only 16 bits long, it  
 was possible to feed message keys into the device until you got one with a given  
 LEAF, so a message could be sent with a LEAF that would reveal nothing to  
 the government [258]. Clipper was replaced with the Capstone chip, the crypto  
 wars continued by other means, and the Skipjack block cipher was placed in the  
 public domain [1400].

Of interest in this chapter are the tamper protection mechanisms used, which

were claimed at the time to be su�cient to withstand a ‘very sophisticated, well  
 funded adversary’ [1398]. Although it was claimed that the Clipper chip would  
 be unclassiﬁed and exportable, I was never able to get hold of a sample despite  
 repeated attempts. It used *Vialink read only memory* (VROM) in which bits  
 are set by blowing antifuses between the metal 1 and metal 2 layers on the  
 chip. A high-voltage programming pulse is used to melt a conducting path

through the polysilicon between two metal layers. This technology was also

used in the QuickLogic FPGA, which was advertised as a way for ﬁrms to  
 conceal proprietary algorithms, and claimed to be ‘virtually impossible to reverse  
 engineer’; further details and micrographs appeared in its data book [801]. A  
 recent variant is the *spot breakdown PUF* where a high enough voltage is applied  
 to a bank of transistors for just long enough that about half of them su↵er  
 breakdown of the gate oxide, creating random failures that can be read as ones  
 and zeros [422].

Fusible links are used on other devices too; recent iPhones, for example,

have an AES key burned into the system-on-chip. There are basically three  
 approaches to reverse engineering an antifuse device.

*•* The ﬁrst thing to look at is the programming circuitry. All such chips  
 programming, and many disabled this by melting a single fuse afterwards.  
 If you can get sample devices and a programmer, you can maybe ﬁnd this  
 fuse using di↵erential optical probing [1772]. You then use a FIB to repair  
 it, or bridge it with two probe needles, and read out the bitstream. This  
 attack technique works not just for antifuse FPGAs but also for the Flash  
 and EEPROM varieties.

*•* Where you need to read out many fuses, as where they’re used to store  
 at a time and read the fuses directly; they turn out to be visible under  
 a suitable chemical stain. As this attack is destructive it is typically of  
 limited interest against keys that are di↵erent in each device (as in the  
 iPhone, or a spot breakdown PUF).

*•* Where the device implements a cryptographic algorithm, a side-channel

about 2000 are rather vulnerable to power analysis, and while smartcard  
 chipmakers have incorporated defences, the makers of larger chips may

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have preferred to avoid paying royalties to Cryptography Research, which  
 patented many of the best ones. You can always try optical fault induction  
 to read the key one bit at a time, and since the late 2000s we also know  
 how to work with optical emissions, which I’ll discuss later.

Secure FPGAs became big business in the 21st century as ﬁrms outsource

the manufacture of electronic goods to the Far East but want to control at least  
 one critical component to prevent overbuild and counterfeiting. Most FPGAs  
 sold now have conventional memory rather than antifuse, so they can be made  
 reprogrammable. If you use a volatile FPGA that stores the bitstream in SRAM,  
 you will want one or more embedded keys kept in nonvolatile memory, so the  
 bitstream is uploaded and then decrypted on power-up. For faster power-up  
 you might choose a non-volatile device that stores the whole bitstream in Flash.  
 In both cases, there may be fuses to protect the key material and the security  
 state [583]. But do watch out for service denial attacks via the upgrade mecha-  
 nism. For example, a Flash FPGA may only have enough memory for one copy  
 of the bitstream, not two; so the na¨ıve approach is to read in the bitstream once  
 to decrypt it and verify the MAC, and then a second time to reprogram the  
 part. But if the bitstream supplied the second time is corrupt, will you have a  
 dead product? And if you allow rollback, your customers can perhaps escape  
 upgrades by replaying old bitstreams. And if an attacker gets your products  
 to load a random encrypted bitstream, this could cause short circuits and brick  
 the part. So stop and think whether anyone might try to destroy your product  
 base via a corrupt upgrade; if so, you might consider a secure bitstream loader.  
 You might also consider a more expensive FPGA with enough on-chip memory  
 to support old and new bitstreams at the same time.

The second type of large-chip security product is the *system-on-chip* (SoC)

with inbuilt authentication logic. The pioneer may have been Sony’s Playstation  
 2 in 2000, which ﬁelded MagicGate, a cryptographic challenge-response protocol  
 run between the device’s graphics chip and small authentication chips embedded  
 in legitimate accessories. The business model of games console manufacturers  
 included charging premium prices for software and additional memory cards,  
 whose sellers had to use copy-control technology and pay the console vendor  
 a royalty; this was used to subsidise the initial cost of the console. Of course,  
 aftermarket operators would then hack their copy-control mechanisms, so Sony  
 set out to dominate its aftermarket with a better copy-control technology. This  
 used some interesting protection tricks; the MagicGate protocol was both simple  
 (so protocol attacks couldn’t be found) and randomised (so attackers couldn’t  
 learn anything from repeating transactions). It took several years and millions  
 of dollars for the aftermarket ﬁrms to catch up. While the authentication logic  
 in a small chip may need a top metal shield, copy traps and layout obfuscation  
 to hide it, the same logic in a large chip can hide among the billions of other  
 transistors.

By the mid-to-late 2000s, similar logic was appearing in system-on-chip prod-

ucts in other industries – sometimes for accessory control, and sometimes to en-  
 able one product be sold with several di↵erent levels of performance as a means  
 of price discrimination. This practice has led to some interesting edge cases.  
 For example, in 2017 Tesla temporarily ‘upgraded’ the batteries of its model S  
 and X cars so that owners could get out of the path of Hurricane Irma [1930].

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So how can you hack the magic devices that we ﬁnd everywhere nowadays?

Memory readout can be the most dependable attack path. As an example,

Sergei Skorobogatov used the new PVC Flash / EEPROM readout technique to  
 reverse the OmniPod insulin pump. Diabetics who know how to program prefer  
 to control their own insulin pumps but vendors try to stop them, for both  
 market control and liability reasons. The OmniPod’s system-on-chip therefore  
 runs an authentication protocol with the device’s authorised controller, and the  
 Nightscout Foundation, an NGO that supports diabetics, wanted to extract the  
 keys so patients could optimise the control for their own health needs rather  
 than following the treatment protocols devised by Omnipod. The analysis is  
 described in [1778].

A second attack path is to look to see whether the device computes with

encrypted data, and if so look for a protocol failure or side-channel that gives  
 a way in. An early example was the *cipher instruction search attack* invented  
 by Markus Kuhn on the DS5002 processor [1102]. This device pioneered *bus*  
 *encryption* with hardware that encrypts memory addresses and contents on the  
 ﬂy as data are loaded and stored, so it was not limited to the small amount of  
 RAM that could be ﬁtted into a low-cost tamper-sensing package at the time  
 (1995). Markus noticed that some of the processor’s instructions have a visible  
 external e↵ect; one instruction in particular caused the next byte in memory  
 to be output to the device’s parallel port. So if you intercept the bus between  
 the processor and memory using a test clip, you can feed in all possible 8-bit  
 instruction bytes at some point in the instruction stream until you see a one-  
 byte output. After using this technique to tabulate the encryption function

for a few bytes, you can encipher and execute a short program to dump the  
 entire memory contents. Similar tricks are still used today, and variants on the  
 attack still work. In 2017 Sergei Skorobogatov demonstrated an active attack  
 on a system-on-chip used in the car industry, which used memory encryption to  
 make bus probing harder. By selectively injecting wrong opcodes into the bus,  
 he was able to reverse the encryption function [1779].

A tougher problem was presented by the iPhone. In March 2016 FBI director

James Comey demanded that Apple produce a law-enforcement ‘upgrade’ to its  
 iOS operating system to enable access to locked iPhones, claiming that the FBI  
 would otherwise be unable to unlock the phone of the San Bernardino shooter.  
 Sergei set out to prove him wrong and by August had a working attack. The  
 phone in question, the Apple 5c, has an SoC with an embedded AES key, set  
 up by burning fusible links; as these can be seen under an electron microscope,  
 read-out may be possible but would destroy the SoC. AES isn’t vulnerable to  
 cryptanalysis, and the encryption appears to work one cache line at a time,  
 so cipher instruction search won’t work. But no matter, as there’s a *NAND*  
 *mirroring attack*. The phone’s non-volatile memory is a NAND Flash chip whose  
 the contents are encrypted, one cache line, by the embedded device key, so that  
 the chip from one phone can’t be read in another. The attack is to desolder the  
 memory chip, mount it in a socket, and copy its contents. You then make half  
 a dozen PIN guesses, and the phone starts to slow down (it locks after ten).  
 Next, you remove the memory chip and restore its original contents. You can  
 now make half a dozen more attempts. With a bit more work, you can clone the  
 chip or build a circuit board to emulate it, so you can guess faster. The details  
 can be found in [1777]. In the end, the FBI used a service from Cellebrite, a

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forensics company, which later turned out to be exploiting the Checkm8 bug in  
 the iPhone ROM [793].

The third type of attack I’ll mention is *optical emission analysis*, which is

strictly speaking a side channel but which I’ll introduce here as it’s becoming  
 one of the main ways of attacking high-grade crypto chips. Photons are emitted  
 when semiconductor junctions switch, and photon emission microscopy is an  
 established failure analysis technique, with silicon emitting mostly in the near  
 infrared near the drain area of n-MOS transistors. This was ﬁrst used to attack  
 a crypto implementation in 2008 by Julie Ferrigno and Martin Hlavac, who used  
 an expensive single-photon counting photomultiplier to read out AES keys from  
 an outdated 0.8*µ* microcontroller, but worried that their technique would not  
 work for technologies smaller than 0.12*µ* [681]. By the following year, Sergei  
 Skorobogatov found that a photomultiplier sold to hobby astronomers was near  
 ideal and discovered a voltage boost trick: increasing the chip supply voltage  
 from 1.5V to 2V increases the photon output sixfold. He found he was almost  
 able to read out the AES keys from the internal crypto engine of a modern chip,  
 the Actel ProASIC3 FGPA. Then, once the AES algorithm timing had been  
 established, and he knew each round key took 1.6*µ*s, he further increased the  
 voltage to 2.5V for the 0.2*µ*s of an individual bus write, giving a further fourfold  
 increase in the photon output plus temporal resolution, which enabled him to  
 read each word of round key clearly o↵ the bus. This was all rather embarrass-  
 ing as I’d consulted on the design to Actel back in 2001. The ProASIC3 was  
 fabricated in a 0.13*µ* technology with 7 metal layers and ﬂash memory, and we  
 had built in all sorts of countermeasures to block the attacks we knew about at  
 the time; reading it out invasively would have been tedious. That was a sharp  
 reminder that it’s hard to block the attacks that haven’t been invented yet, and  
 that attacks can improve very quickly once experts start to hone them. Optical  
 emission analysis is now used in combination attacks: if you want to attack a  
 chip that’s too big to reverse engineer, you observe the emissions as it does the  
 cryptography and this tells you where to aim your laser as you try a fault attack  
 or optically-enhanced power analysis. It can also suggest where you might lay  
 down a few probe points with your FIB.

**18.5.6** **The state of the art**

How well can you protect a single-chip product against a capable motivated  
 opponent? In the late 1990s, everything got broken, and in the 2001 edition of  
 this book, I wrote, “there isn’t any technology, or combination of technologies,  
 known to me which can make a smartcard resistant to penetration by a skilled  
 and determined attacker.” During the 2000s, the defence improved because of  
 the e↵orts of the pay-TV ﬁrms and the banking industry, so in the second edition  
 I wrote “This is still almost true, but ... you can be looking at a year’s delay, a  
 budget of over a million dollars, and no certainty of success.”

Now, in 2019, Moore’s law has run out of steam; crypto chips are mostly

stuck at about 100nm, while the semiconductor test equipment industry is aim-  
 ing to support 9nm processing and still turning out innovations such as passive  
 voltage contrast microscopy; and researchers are ﬁnding innovative ways to use  
 their products. So the attackers are starting to catch up. The scope of the

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industry is also increasing. In 2007, we had a handful of smartcard OEMs,

a handful of reversing labs and a handful of interested academics; now many  
 chipmakers are being asked by their customers for some tamper-resistance, as  
 products from routers to the Raspberry Pi acquire some kind of secure boot  
 capability to defeat persistent malware. So there are ever more medium-grade  
 products that are suitable for grad students to learn the art and craft of hard-  
 ware reverse engineering5. And the growing demand, particularly in China, to  
 reverse devices for compatibility drives the growth of commercial reversing labs.  
 The market’s now big enough for people to make a living selling specialist tools  
 such as layout-reconstruction software and optical fault induction workstations.  
 As a result, attackers are getting more numerous and more e�cient. I suspect  
 that the cost of cloning a smartcard will steadily come down through the tens  
 of thousands and perhaps into the single thousands.

Security economics remains a big soft spot, with security chips being in many

ways a market for lemons. A banker buying HSMs probably won’t be aware  
 of the huge gap between FIPS level 3 and level 4, and understand that level  
 3 can sometimes be defeated with a Swiss army knife. The buying incentive  
 there is compliance, and where real security clashes with operations it’s not  
 surprising to see weaker standards designed to make compliance easier. API  
 security is too hard, and the di↵erence between HSMs’ internal and external  
 APIs makes it too confusing. The near-abdication of FIPS in favour of ISO  
 19790 and various protection proﬁles touted under the Common Criteria will  
 confuse things further, as will the UK’s move away from the Criteria. Confusion  
 marketing and liability games appear set to continue. But does this matter?

First, most of the HSM business is moving to the cloud, with Azure and

AWS each having of the order of 2,000 HSMs, and Google playing catchup.  
 Instead of having a few thousand banks each running a few, or a few dozen,  
 HSMs we’ll have three companies running a few thousand. As the prices are  
 driven down, the HSM vendor engineers’ expertise will be lost; and as the cloud  
 service providers guard their datacentres, HSMs are likely to be replaced by  
 crypto chips.

Second, most of the volume smartcard markets – SIM cards and EMV cards

– have only moderate physical protection requirements as a full compromise  
 enables the attacker to exploit one account only. You don’t want a bad terminal  
 to be able to do production power-analysis attacks on every EMV card it sees,  
 but even if that were to happen it’s not the end of the world, as that’s how mag-  
 stripe cards got cloned, and we know how to limit the damage. The pay-TV  
 markets used to lead innovation and customise the chips they used, as a single  
 break can enable a pirate to sell hundreds of thousands of clone cards. But  
 pay-TV is now moving to wireline broadband, and the companies learned that  
 more secure chips aren’t the only way to cut losses: more complex smartcards  
 played a role, but much of the improvement came from legal action against  
 pirates, and from making technical and legal measures work together e�ciently.  
 Gadget makers nowadays lock their products into ecosystems with cloud services  
 and apps, which makes manufacturing control less dependent on tamper-proof  
 FPGAs.

5My colleagues Franck Courbon, Markus Kuhn and Sergei Skorobogatov now run just such

a course for our graduate students.

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I therefore expect that although the number and variety of crypto chips will

continue to increase, the quality of physical protection will remain indi↵erent.  
 Vendors will spend only as much money as they need to in order to meet cer-  
 tiﬁcation requirements, which will remain slippery and will be gamed. Security  
 engineers will have to get used to building systems out of grey-box components  
 – chips from which keys and algorithms can be extracted, given some e↵ort.

I suspect that accessory control will remain the toughest hardware battle-

ﬁeld. Aftermarket control isn’t just about printer cartridges nowadays but ex-  
 tends to vehicles, medical devices and other high-value products. But where at  
 least one of the two devices that authenticate each other goes online at least  
 occasionally, the protection requirements are much less severe than for satellite  
 TV. The real question will be how to stop attacks scaling.

**18.6** **The Residual Risk**

The security engineer will therefore have to pay attention to the many failure  
 modes of systems involving tamper-resistant processors that are more or less  
 independent of the price or technical tamper-resistance of the device.

**18.6.1** **The trusted interface problem**

None of the devices described in the above sections has a really trustworthy user  
 interface6. Some of the bank security modules have a physical lock (or two) on  
 the front to ensure that only the person with a given metal key (or smartcard)  
 can perform privileged transactions. But whether you use a $2000 4765 or a $2  
 smartcard to do digital signatures, you still trust the PC that drives them. If it  
 shows you a text saying“Please pay amazon.com $47.99 for a copy of Anderson’s  
 *Security Engineering*”while the message it actually sends for signature is“Please  
 remortgage my house at 13 Acacia Avenue and pay the proceeds to Maﬁa Real  
 Estate Inc”, then the tamper resistance hasn’t bought you much.

Indeed, it probably makes your situation worse. Nick Bohm, Ian Brown and

Brian Gladman pointed out that when you use a qualifying electronic signature  
 device, you’re saying ‘I agree to be unreservedly liable for all signatures that  
 are veriﬁed by the key that I now present to you and I will underwrite all the  
 risks taken by anyone as a result of relying on it’ [277]. I will discuss the history  
 and politics of this later in Section 26.5.2. The EU eIDAS regulation requires  
 all EU governments to accept qualifying electronic signatures for transactions  
 where they previously required ink on paper, and set standards for technical  
 certiﬁcation of signature devices. The industry has duly produced dozens of  
 certiﬁed products. Given the liability shift compared with ink-on-paper sig-

natures, no sensible person would use a qualifying electronic signature device  
 unless they had to. So the lobbyists have been at work, and some countries  
 now insist you use them to ﬁle your taxes. This has led researchers in Germany  
 to look closely at how signatures, signature veriﬁcation services and pdf ﬁles

6The iPhone secure enclave processor (SEP) has a direct link to the ﬁngerprint reader but

relies on the main application processor for everything else including FaceID.

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interact; as you might expect, the results are somewhat shocking. Vladislav  
 Mladenov, Christian Mainka, Kersten Mayer zu Selhausen, Martin Grothe and  
 J¨org Schwenk created a document signed by Amazon in Germany and backed  
 by all the o�cial machinery, certifying that you are due a refund of one trillion  
 dollars. They found three new attacks on pdf signatures, worked out how to  
 bypass signature validation in 21 out of 22 viewers, and cheated 6 of 8 online  
 validation services [1326]. It’s a fair bet that this is just the tip of an iceberg.

Another example comes from the hardware wallets that some people use

to store cryptocurrency. Early products had no trusted display and were thus  
 vulnerable to malware. Some later ones combined a smartcard chip acting as a  
 secure element, with a less secure microcontroller driving a display. This opens  
 a number of possibilities – including an *evil maid attack* described by Saleem  
 Rashid where someone with temporary access to the device, such as a hotel maid,  
 reﬂashes the microcontroller software [1580]. In this case the secure element had  
 no idea whether the main processor was running compromised code.

Trustworthy interfaces aren’t always needed, as tamper-resistant processors

are often able to do useful work without having to authenticate users. Recall  
 the example of prepayment electricity metering, in Chapter 14: there, tamper-  
 resistant processors can maintain a value counter, enforcing a credit limit on  
 each operator and limiting the loss when a vending machine is stolen. Postal  
 meters work the same way. In other applications from printer ink cartridges  
 through games consoles to prepaid phone cards, the vendor mainly cares about  
 use control.

**18.6.2** **Conﬂicts**

A further set of issues is that where an application is implemented on devices  
 under the control of di↵erent parties, you have to consider what happens when  
 each party attacks the others. In banking, the card issuer, the terminal owner  
 and the customer are di↵erent; all the interactions of cloned cards, bogus ter-  
 minals, gangland merchants and cheating banks need to be thought through.

A particular source of conﬂict and vulnerability is that many of the users of

tamper resistance have business models that make their customers the enemy  
 – such as rights management and accessory control. Their customers may own  
 the product, but have the incentive to tamper with it if they can. In the case  
 of accessory control, they may also have a legal right to try to break it; and  
 where the mechanisms are used to limit device lifetime and thus contribute to  
 environmental pollution, they may even feel they have a moral duty.

**18.6.3** **The lemons market, risk dumping and evaluation**  
 **games**

Each of the product categories discussed here, from HSMs down through FPGAs  
 to smartcards, has a wide range of o↵erings with wide variability in the quality  
 of protection. Many products have evaluations, but interpreting them is hard.

First, there are relatively few o↵erings at high levels of assurance – whether

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FIPS-140 level 4 or Common Criteria levels above 4. There are many at lower  
 levels, where the tests are fairly easy to pass, and where vendors can shop around  
 for a lab that will give them an easy ride. This leads to a lemons market in  
 which all but the best informed buyers will be tempted to go for the cheapest  
 FIPS level 3 or CC EAL4 product.

Second, evaluation certiﬁcates don’t mean what they seem. Someone buying

a 4758 in 2001 might have interpreted its level 4 evaluation to mean that it  
 was unbreakable – and then been startled when we broke it. In fact, the FIPS  
 certiﬁcate referred only to the hardware, and we found vulnerabilities in the  
 software. It’s happened the other way too: there’s been a smartcard with a  
 Common Criteria level 6 evaluation, but that referred only to the operating  
 system – which ran on a chip with no real defences against microprobing. I’ll  
 discuss the failings of evaluation systems at greater length in Part III.

Third, while HSMs tend to be evaluated under FIPS, smartcard vendors

tend to use the Common Criteria. There the tussles are about which protection  
 proﬁle to use; vendors naturally want the labs to evaluate the aspects of security  
 they think they’re good at.

Finally, many ﬁrms use secure processors to dump risk rather than minimise

it. Banks love to be able to say ‘your chip and PIN card was used, so it’s your  
 fault’ and in many countries the regulators let them get away with it. There are  
 many environments, from medicine to defense, where buyers want a certiﬁcate  
 of security rather than real protection, and this interacts in many ways with the  
 ﬂaws in the evaluation system. Indeed, the main users of evaluated products  
 are precisely those system operators whose focus is on due diligence rather than  
 risk reduction.

**18.6.4** **Security-by-obscurity**

Many designers have tried hard to keep their cryptoprocessor secret. You have  
 almost always had to sign an NDA to get smartcard development tools. The  
 protection proﬁles still used for evaluating many smartcards under the Common  
 Criteria emphasise design obscurity. Chip masks have to be secret, instruction  
 set architectures are proprietary, sta↵ have to be vetted, developers have to  
 sign NDAs – these all pushed up industry’s costs [650]. Obscurity was also a  
 common requirement for export approval, leading to a suspicion that it covers up  
 deliberate vulnerabilities. For example, a card we tested would always produce  
 the same value when instructed to generate a private / public keypair and output  
 the public part. Many products that incorporate encryption have been broken  
 because their random number generators weren’t random enough [775, 576] and  
 as we discussed, the NSA got NIST to standardise a weak one.

Some HSM vendors have been an honourable exception; IBM’s Common

Cryptographic Architecture has been well documented from the beginning, as  
 has Intel’s SGX and the core mechanisms of Arm’s TrustZone. This openness  
 has facilitated the discovery of API attacks on IBM’s product, as well as side-  
 channel and ROP attacks on Intel’s and more recently Arm’s. But most such  
 attacks have been disclosed responsibly and the learning process has improved  
 their products.

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*18.7. SO WHAT SHOULD ONE PROTECT?*

One tussle in 2020 is over whether the development environment needs to be

air-gapped. This has been common practice for years in smartcard OEMs; one  
 lab we visited had only a single PC connected to the Internet (painted red, on  
 a pedestal) so sta↵ could book ﬂights and hotels. These ﬁrms are now pushing  
 evaluators to emphasise the risk that an attacker ends up owning the entire  
 company infrastructure using an advanced persistent threat. That would make  
 life inconvenient for ﬁrms that have always operated online, as they would have  
 to rebuild toolchains and change their workﬂows.

A smart evaluator would not be taken in by such gamesmanship. Almost

none of the actual attacks on smartcards used inside information; most of them  
 started out with a probing attack or side-channel attack on a card bought at  
 retail. As the industry did not do hostile attacks on its own products in the  
 early years, its products were weak and were eventually broken by others. Since  
 the late 1990s some organisations, such as VISA, have speciﬁed penetration  
 testing [1963]. But the incentives are still wrong; a sensible vendor will go to  
 whatever evaluation lab o↵ers the easiest ride. We’ll discuss the underlying

economics and politics of evaluation in Section 28.2.7.2.

**18.6.5** **Changing environments**

We’ve already seen examples of how function creep, and changes in the environ-  
 ment, have broken systems by undermining their design assumptions. A general  
 problem is ‘leverage’ – where ﬁrms try to exploit infrastructure maintained by  
 others, without negotiating proper contracts. We’ve seen how the SIM card that  
 was previously just a means of identifying people to the phone company became  
 a token that controls access to their bank accounts. In the second edition of  
 this book, I wrote “Does this matter? ... I’d say it probably doesn’t; using text  
 messages to conﬁrm bank transactions gives a valuable second authentication  
 channel at almost zero marginal cost to both the bank and the customer.” At  
 that time, we had one reported case of a SIM swap attack, in South Africa.

In the following paragraph, I wrote: “But what will happen in ﬁve or ten

years’ time, once everyone is doing it? What if the iPhone takes o↵ as Apple  
 hopes, so that everyone uses an iPhone not just as their phone, but as their web  
 browser? All of a sudden the two authentication channels have shrunk to one.”  
 And so it is; SIM swap is now going mainstream in the USA.

This is actually tied up with local law and regulation. In most countries,

phone companies are not liable to banks for failing to authenticate their cus-  
 tomers properly. After all, phone companies just sell minutes, and the marginal  
 cost of stolen minutes is near zero. But one country with little SIM swap fraud  
 is India, where regulators decided that phone companies must share liability for  
 SIM swap fraud, and where the phone company is required to check a customer’s  
 ﬁngerprint against the national Aadhar database before selling them a SIM.

**18.7** **So What Should One Protect?**

In such a complex world, what value can tamper-resistant chips add?

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*18.7. SO WHAT SHOULD ONE PROTECT?*

First, they can tie information processing to a single physical token. A pay-

TV subscriber card can be bought and sold in a grey market, but so long as it  
 isn’t copied the station operator isn’t losing much revenue. This also applies to  
 accessory control, where a printer vendor wants their product to work with any  
 genuine ink cartridge, just not with a cheap competitor.

Second, they can maintain value counters, as with the postal metering dis-

cussed in Chapter 13. Even if the device is stolen, the total value of the service  
 it can vend is limited. In printers, ink cartridges can be programmed to dispense  
 only so much ink and then declare themselves dry.

Third, they can reduce the need to trust human operators. Their main pur-

pose in some government systems was ‘reducing the street value of key material  
 to zero’. A crypto ignition key for a secure phone should allow a thief only  
 to masquerade as the rightful owner, and only if they have access to an actual  
 device, and only so long as neither the key nor the phone has been reported  
 stolen. The same general considerations applied in ATM networks, which not  
 only implement a separation-of-duty policy, but transfer a lot of the trust from  
 people to things.

Fourth, they can protect a physical root of trust that monitors secure boot,

and thus make it hard for malware to be persistent. This mission of its own does  
 not require high-grade physical protection; security against capable motivated  
 software attackers is the key. One question is whether activists who want to  
 run their own favoured version of Linux on their devices actually have to break  
 the TPM, or whether they can just ignore it and manage the malware risk  
 themselves.

Fifth, they can control the risk of overproduction by untrusted hardware

contractors: sometimes called the ‘third shift’ problem, where the factory you  
 hire runs two shifts to make devices for you and a third shift to make some more  
 for grey-market sale. This can involve embedding part of the design in an FPGA  
 that’s hard to reverse engineer, or by having a TPM to control the credentials  
 necessary for the device to work in your ecosystem. As things acquire cloud  
 services and apps, ﬁrms are moving from the former strategy to the latter,  
 which has lower hardware costs and is easier to manage. You just release as  
 many credentials as the factory ships you products.

Sixth, such techniques can control some of the more general risk from coun-

terfeit electronic parts. This covers a multitude of sins, from cheap knock-o↵s  
 that cause early product failure through to sophisticated supply-chain attacks  
 by state adversaries. For a survey, see Guin et al [833]. The techniques described  
 in this chapter also ﬁnd use in the ﬁght against counterfeiting, as do many of  
 the tools. As for supply-chain attacks, the most pernicious may be hardware  
 trojans. One national-security concern is that as defence systems increasingly  
 depend on chips fabricated overseas, the fabs might introduce extra circuitry  
 to facilitate later attack. For example, some extra logic might cause a 64-bit  
 multiply with two speciﬁc inputs to function as a kill switch. This has been  
 the subject of signiﬁcant research since about 2010, and mechanisms have been  
 developed for Trojan detection both pre-silicon and post-silicon; for example,  
 you can do a di↵erential side-channel analysis of a ‘golden’ reference chip and  
 a target of evaluation [1775]. This of course assumes that you can produce

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a reference chip in a trustworthy fab. For a survey of this ﬁeld, see Xiao et  
 al [2053].

This is an incomplete list. But what these applications have in common is

that a security property can be provided independently of the trustworthiness  
 of the surrounding environment. But beware: the actual protection properties  
 that are required and provided can be quite subtle, and tamper-resistant devices  
 are more often a useful component than a full solution. Generic mechanisms fail  
 again and again; security is not some kind of magic pixie dust that you sprinkle  
 on a system to cause bad things to not happen. You need to work out what  
 bad things you want to stop. If you’re not careful you can ﬁnd yourself paying  
 for smartcards and crypto modules in applications where they add rather little;  
 and if you’re really unlucky you may ﬁnd that the industry lobbied for legal  
 mandates or industry standards to force you to use their products.

**18.8** **Summary**

Tamper-resistant devices and systems have a long history. Computers can be  
 protected against physical tampering in a number of ways, from keeping them  
 locked up in a guarded room, through putting them in tamper-sensing boxes, to  
 making them into single chips with shields against probing and defences against  
 side-channel attacks.

I’ve told the story of how hardware tamper-resistance developed through a

series of cycles of attack and defence, and given examples of applications. Secu-  
 rity processors are typically vulnerable to attacks on interfaces (human, sensor  
 or system) but can often deliver value in applications where we need to link pro-  
 cessing to physical objects and to protect security state against scalable threats,  
 particularly in environments where any online service may be intermittent.

**Research Problems**

There are basically two strands of research in tamper-resistant processor design.  
 The ﬁrst concerns itself with making ‘faster, better, cheaper, more secure’ pro-  
 cessors: how can the protection o↵ered by a high-end device be brought to chips  
 that cost under a dollar? The second concerns itself with pushing forward the  
 state of the attack art. How can the latest chip testing technologies be used to  
 make ‘faster, better, cheaper, novel’ attacks? The best guide for the second may  
 be Sergei Skorobogatov’s 2018 talk, “Hardware Security: Present challenges and  
 Future directions” [1780].

A broader area of research is how to build more secure systems out of less

secure components. How can moderately protected chips be used e↵ectively to  
 stop various kinds of attack scaling?

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**Further Reading**

I’m not aware of any up-to-date systematisation of knowledge paper on hardware  
 tamper resistance. Colleagues and I wrote a survey of security processors in  
 2005 [100] which might serve as a more detailed starting point, if slightly dated;  
 of the same vintage are a summer school on attack techniques [1772] as well  
 as reviews of FPGA security [583] and microcontroller security [1767, 1769].  
 Bunnie Huang’s book on hacking the Xbox is still a good read [930]. A slightly  
 later summary, from an industry perspective, is by Randy Torrance and Dick  
 James of Chipworks in 2009 [1897].

As for the last decade of research, the best current papers often appear at

conferences such as CHES (for the crypto), HOST (Trojans and backdoors),  
 FDTC (fault attacks) and Cardis (smartcards). Failure analysis research tends  
 to appear at ISTFA and IPFA.

For the early history – the weighted codebooks and water-soluble inks – read

David Kahn’s book ‘The Code Breakers’ [1001]. For a handbook on the chip  
 card technology of the mid-to-late 1990s, see [1578], while the gory details of how  
 we started tampering with those generations of cards can be found in [106, 107,  
 1078]. The IBM products mentioned have extensive documentation online [951],  
 where you can also ﬁnd the US FIPS documents [1397].

For modern chip testing techniques, I recommend the video of a keynote

talk by John Walker at Hardwear.IO 2019 on how to use FIBs in reverse engi-  
 neering [1975] as well as the talks at the same event by Chris Tarnovsky on the  
 evolution of chip defense technology [1862].

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