

# SQL Injection Attack Lab

Copyright © 2006 - 2010 Wenliang Du, Syracuse University.

The development of this document is funded by the National Science Foundation's Course, Curriculum, and Laboratory Improvement (CCLI) program under Award No. 0618680 and 0231122. Permission is granted to copy, distribute and/or modify this document under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.2 or any later version published by the Free Software Foundation. A copy of the license can be found at <http://www.gnu.org/licenses/fdl.html>.

## 1 Overview

SQL injection is a code injection technique that exploits the vulnerabilities in the interface between web applications and database servers. The vulnerability is present when user's inputs are not correctly checked within the web applications before sending to the back-end database servers.

Many web applications take inputs from users, and then use these inputs to construct SQL queries, so the web applications can pull the information out of the database. Web applications also use SQL queries to store information in the database. These are common practices in the development of web applications. When the SQL queries are not carefully constructed, SQL-injection vulnerabilities can occur. SQL-injection attacks is one of the most frequent attacks on web applications.

In this lab, we modified a web application called `phpBB`, and disabled several countermeasures implemented by `phpBB2`. As the results, we created a version of `phpBB` that is vulnerable to the SQL-Injection attack. Although our modifications are artificial, they capture the common mistakes made by many web developers. Students' goal in this lab is to find ways to exploit the SQL-Injection vulnerabilities, demonstrate the damage that can be achieved by the attacks, and master the techniques that can help defend against such attacks.

## 2 Lab Environment

You need to use our provided virtual machine image for this lab. The name of the VM image that supports this lab is called `SEEDUbuntu9-Aug-2010`, which is built in August 2010. If you happen to have an older version of our pre-built VM image, you need to download the most recent version, as the older version does not work for this lab. Go to our SEED web page (<http://www.cis.syr.edu/~wedu/seed/>) to get the VM image.

### 2.1 Environment Configuration

In this lab, we will need three things: (1) the Firefox web browser, (2) the apache web server, and (3) the `phpBB2` message board web application. For the browser, we need to use several Firefox add-ons to inspect and/or modify the HTTP requests and responses. The pre-built Ubuntu VM image provided to you has already installed the Firefox web browser with the required extensions.

**Starting the Apache Server.** The apache web server is also included in the pre-built Ubuntu image. However, the web server is not started by default. You have to first start the web server using the following command:

```
% sudo service apache2 start
```

**The phpBB2 Web Application.** The phpBB2 web application is already set up in the pre-built Ubuntu VM image. We have also created several user accounts in the phpBB2 server. The password information can be obtained from the posts on the front page. You can access the phpBB2 server using the following URL (the apache server needs to be started first):

```
http://www.sqlllabmysqlphpbb.com
```

The source code of web application is located at `/var/www/SQL/SQLLabMySQLPhpbb/`.

**Configuring DNS.** This URL is only accessible from inside of the virtual machine, because we have modified the `/etc/hosts` file to map the domain name (`www.sqlllabmysqlphpbb.com`) to the virtual machine's local IP address (`127.0.0.1`). You may map any domain name to a particular IP address using the `/etc/hosts`. For example you can map `http://www.example.com` to the local IP address by appending the following entry to `/etc/hosts` file:

```
127.0.0.1      www.example.com
```

Therefore, if your web server and browser are running on two different machines, you need to modify the `/etc/hosts` file on the browser's machine accordingly to map `www.sqlllabmysqlphpbb.com` to the web server's IP address.

**Configuring Apache Server.** In the pre-built VM image, we use Apache server to host all the web sites used in the SEED labs. The name-based virtual hosting feature in Apache could be used to host several web sites (or URLs) on the same machine. A configuration file named `default` in the directory `"/etc/apache2/sites-available"` contains the necessary directives for the configuration:

1. The directive `"NameVirtualHost *"` instructs the web server to use all IP addresses in the machine (some machines may have multiple IP addresses).
2. Each web site has a `VirtualHost` block that specifies the URL for the web site and directory in the file system that contains the sources for the web site. For example, to configure a web site with URL `http://www.example1.com` with sources in directory `/var/www/Example_1/`, and to configure a web site with URL `http://www.example2.com` with sources in directory `/var/www/Example_2/`, we use the following blocks:

```
<VirtualHost *>
    ServerName http://www.example1.com
    DocumentRoot /var/www/Example_1/
</VirtualHost>

<VirtualHost *>
    ServerName http://www.example2.com
    DocumentRoot /var/www/Example_2/
</VirtualHost>
```

You may modify the web application by accessing the source in the mentioned directories. For example, with the above configuration, the web application `http://www.example1.com` can be changed by modifying the sources in the directory `/var/www/Example_1/`.

## 2.2 Turn Off the Countermeasure

PHP provides a mechanism to automatically defend against SQL injection attacks. The method is called magic quote, and more details will be introduced in Task 3. Let us turn off this protection first (this protection method is deprecated after PHP version 5.3.0).

1. Go to `/etc/php5/apache2/php.ini`.
2. Find the line: `magic_quotes_gpc = On`.
3. Change it to this: `magic_quotes_gpc = Off`.
4. Restart the apache server by running `"sudo service apache2 restart"`.

## 2.3 Note for Instructors

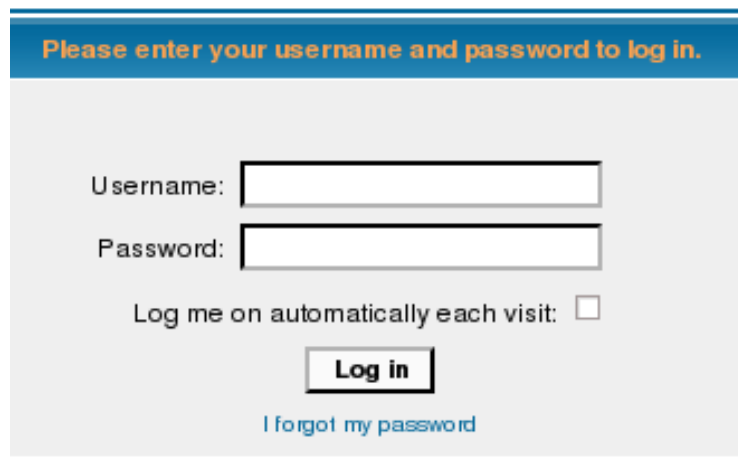
If the instructor plans to hold lab sessions for this lab, we suggest that the following background materials be covered in the lab sessions:

1. How to use the virtual machine, Firefox web browser, the LiveHttpHeaders and Tamper Data add-ons.
2. Brief introduction to SQL: only needs to cover the basic structure of the SELECT, UPDATE, and INSERT statements. A useful online SQL tutorial can be found at <http://www.w3schools.com/sql/>.
3. How to operate the MySQL database (only the basics). The account information about the MySQL database can be found in the *"User Manual of the Pre-built Ubuntu 9 Virtual Machine"*, which can be downloaded from our SEED web page.
4. Brief introduction to PHP: only needs to cover the very basics. Students who have a background in C/C++, Java, or other language should be able to pick up this script language quite quickly.

# 3 Lab Tasks

## 3.1 Task 1 (30 Points): SQL Injection Attack on SELECT Statements

For this task, you will use the web application accessible via the URL `www.sqlllabmysqlphpbb.com`, which is phpBB2 configured with MySQL database, inside your virtual machine. Before you start to use phpBB2, the system will ask you to login. The authentication is implemented by `login.php` on the server side. This program will display a login window to the user and ask the user to type their username and password. The login window is displayed in the following:



Once the user types the username and password, the `login.php` program will use the user-provided data to find out whether they match with the `username` and `user_password` fields of any record in the database. If there is a match, it means the user has provided a correct username and password combination, and should be allowed to login. Like most other web applications, PHP programs interact with their back-end databases using the standard SQL language. In `phpBB2`, the following SQL query is constructed in `login.php` to authenticate users:

```
SELECT user_id, username, user_password, user_active, user_level,
       user_login_tries, user_last_login_try
FROM   USERS_TABLE
WHERE  username = '$username' AND user_password = 'md5($password)';

if (found one record)
then {allow the user to login}
```

In the above SQL statement, the `USERS_TABLE` is a macro in `php` which will be replaced by the users table name: `phpbb_users`, `$username` is a variable that holds the string typed in the Username textbox, and `$password` is a variable that holds the string typed in the Password textbox. User's inputs in these two textboxes are placed directly in the SQL query string.

**SQL Injection Attacks on Login:** There is a SQL-injection vulnerability in the above query. Can you take advantage of this vulnerability to achieve the following objectives?

- Can you log into another person's account without knowing the correct password?
- Can you find a way to modify the database (still using the above SQL query)? For example, can you add a new account to the database, or delete an existing user account? Obviously, the above SQL statement is a query-only statement, and cannot update the database. However, using SQL injection, you can turn the above statement into two statements, with the second one being the update statement. Please try this method, and see whether you can successfully update the database.

To be honest, we are unable to achieve the update goal. This is because of a particular defense mechanism implemented in MySQL. In the report, you should show us what you have tried in order to modify the database. You should find out why the attack fails, what mechanism in MySQL has

prevented such an attack. You may look up evidences (second-hand) from the Internet to support your conclusion. However, a first-hand evidence will get more points (use your own creativity to find out first-hand evidences). If in case you find ways to succeed in the attacks, you will be awarded bonus points.

### 3.2 Task 2 (30 Points): SQL Injection on UPDATE Statements

When users want to update their profiles in phpBB2, they can click the `Profile` link, and then fill in a form to update the profile information. After the user sends the update request to the server, an `UPDATE` SQL statement will be constructed in `include/usercp_register.php`. The objective of this statement is to modify the current user's profile information in `phpbb_users` table. There is a SQL injection vulnerability in this SQL statement. Please find the vulnerability, and then use it to do the following:

- Change another user's profile without knowing his/her password. For example, if you are logged in as Alice, your goal is to use the vulnerability to modify Ted's profile information, including Ted's password. After the attack, you should be able to log into Ted's account.

### 3.3 Task 3 (40 Points): Countermeasures

The fundamental problem of SQL injection vulnerability is the failure of separating code from data. When constructing a SQL statement, the program (e.g. PHP program) knows what part is data and what part is code. Unfortunately, when the SQL statement is sent to the database, the boundary has disappeared; the boundaries that the SQL interpreter sees may be different from the original boundaries, if code are injected into the data field. To solve this problem, it is important to ensure that the view of the boundaries are consistent in the server-side code and in the database. There are various ways to achieve this: this objective.

- **Task 3.1: Escaping Special Characters using `magic_quotes_gpc`.** In the PHP code, if a data variable is the string type, it needs to be enclosed within a pair of single quote symbols (`'`). For example, in the SQL query listed above, we see `username = '$username'`. The single quote symbol surrounding `$username` basically “tries” to separate the data in the `$username` variable from the code. Unfortunately, this separation will fail if the contents of `$username` include any single quote. Therefore, we need a mechanism to tell the database that a single quote in `$username` should be treated as part of the data, not as a special character in SQL. All we need to do is to add a backslash (`\`) before the single quote.

PHP provides a mechanism to automatically add a backslash before single-quote (`'`), double quote (`"`), backslash (`\`), and NULL characters. If this option is turned on, all these characters in the inputs from the users will be automatically escaped. To turn on this option, go to `/etc/php5/apache2/php.ini`, and add `magic_quotes_gpc = On` (the option is already on in the VM provided to you). Remember, if you update `php.ini`, you need to restart the apache server by running `"sudo service apache2 restart"`; otherwise, your change will not take effect.

Please turn on/off the magic quote mechanism, and see how it help the protection. Please be noted that starting from PHP 5.3.0 (the version in our provided VM is 5.2.6), the feature has been DEPRECATED, due to several reasons:

- Portability: Assuming it to be on, or off, affects portability. Most code has to use a function called `get_magic_quotes_gpc()` to check for this, and code accordingly.

- Performance and Inconvenience: not all user inputs are used for SQL queries, so mandatory escaping all data not only affects performance, but also become annoying when some data are not supposed to be escaped.

- **Task 3.2: Escaping Special Characters using `addslashes()`.** A PHP function called `addslashes()` can also achieve what the magic quote does. The original phpBB2 code uses `addslashes()` to defend against the SQL injection attacks if the magic quote is not turned on. Please look at the `common.php` file in `/var/www/SQL/SQLLabMysqlPhpbb` (`common.php` is included by `login.php`, so it will be executed whenever `login.php` is executed). We actually commented out the protection in phpBB2 to make the SQL injection possible. Please turn the protection back on to see the difference by removing `"and FALSE"` from the the following line (we added `"and False"` to bypass this block of code). Please describe how this protection scheme help defend against your SQL injection attacks:

```
if( !get_magic_quotes_gpc() and FALSE )
```

After removing `"and False"`, the countermeasure within the if-block will be executed if the magic quote mechanism is turned off<sup>1</sup>. To help describe your observations, you should print out the SQL queries, and see how the mechanism affect the queries. Please go to the guideline section to learn how to print out information in PHP programs.

- **Task 3.3: Escaping Special Characters using `mysql_real_escape_string`.** A better way to escape data to defend against SQL injection is to use database specific escaping mechanisms, instead of relying upon features like magical quotes. MySQL provides an escaping mechanism, called `mysql_real_escape_string()`, which prepends backslashes to a few special characters, including `\x00`, `\n`, `\r`, `\`, `'`, `"` and `\x1A`. Please use this function to fix the SQL injection vulnerabilities identified in the previous tasks. You should disable the other protection schemes described in the previous tasks before working on this task.
- **Task 3.4: Prepare Statement.** A more general solution to separating data from SQL logic is to tell the database exactly which part is the data part and which part is the logic part. MySQL provides the prepare statement mechanism for this purpose.

```
$db = new mysqli("localhost", "user", "pass", "db");
$stmt = $db->prepare("SELECT * FROM users WHERE name=? AND age=?");
$stmt->bind_param("si", $user, $age);
$stmt->execute();
```

Using the prepare statement mechanism, we divide the process of sending a SQL statement to the database into two steps. The first step is to send the code, i.e., the SQL statement without the data that need to be plugged in later. This is the prepare step. After this step, we then send the data to the database using `bind_param()`. The database will treat everything sent in this step only as data, not as code anymore.

---

<sup>1</sup>Even if the magic quote option is turned on in `php.ini`, a statement in the beginning of `common.php` turned off the magic quote at runtime. This is done using `set_magic_quotes_runtime(0)`. That is why `get_magic_quotes_gpc()` will be false. It should be noted that turning on the magic quotes at runtime does not affect the inputs provided by the users (i.e., those in `$_GET` and `$_POST`). It only affects the other inputs (e.g. input from files, etc). The function `set_magic_quotes_runtime()` is also deprecated starting from PHP version 5.3.0.

Please use the prepare statement mechanism to fix the SQL injection vulnerability in the phpBB2 code. In the `bind_param` function, the first argument "si" means that the first parameter (`$user`) has a string type, and the second parameter (`$age`) has an integer type.

## 4 Guidelines

**Print out debugging information.** When we debug traditional programs (e.g. C programs) without using any debugging tool, we often use `printf()` to print out some debugging information. In web applications, whatever are printed out by the server-side program is actually displayed in the web page sent to the users; the debugging printout may mess up with the web page. There are several ways to solve this problem. A simple way is to print out all the information to a file. For example, the following code snippet can be used by the server-side PHP program to print out the value of a variable to a file.

```
$myFile = "/tmp/mylog.txt";  
$fh = fopen($myFile, 'a') or die("can't open file");  
$Data = "a string";  
fwrite($fh, $Data . "\n");  
fclose($fh);
```

**A useful Firefox Add-on.** Firefox has an add-on called "Tamper Data", it allows you to modify each field in the HTTP request before the request is sent to the server. For example, after clicking a button on a web page, an HTTP request will be generated. However, before it is sent out, the "Tamper Data" add-on intercepts the request, and gives you a chance to make an arbitrary change on the request. This tool is quite handy in this lab.

The add-on only works for Firefox versions 3.5 and above. If your firefox has an earlier version, you need to upgrade it for this add-on. In our most recently built virtual machine image (SEEDUbuntu9-Aug-2010), Firefox is already upgraded to version 3.6, and the "Tamper Data" add-on is already installed.

## 5 Submission

You need to submit a detailed lab report to describe what you have done and what you have observed. You also need to provide explanation to the observations that are interesting or surprising.