

# Return Oriented Programming

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**Abstract.** In this paper we introduce the concept of Return Oriented Programming, how to apply it, how to protect against it and show a concrete attack.

**Keywords:** ROP · Return Oriented Programming · Buffer Overflow · Binary Exploitation

## 1 Introduction

BIBLIOGRAFIE NICHT VERGESSEN Return Oriented Programming is a type of buffer overflow attack that has been published in 2007 and ever since has become a widely known buffer overflow technique. It has been developed to circumvent the NX-BIT protection that protects the stack from being executed. At the time of writing this paper modern techniques like Stack Canaries and ASLR prevent these attacks from being practical but there are millions of running systems using old hard-, firm- and software that is possibly vulnerable to these kinds of buffer overflow attacks. Return Oriented Programming is based on chaining return addresses to code just before a return and therefor allowing almost arbitrary code segments to be chained.

## 2 Gadgets

**Introduction** Gadgets are code segments that sit before a `ret` instruction, that is an instruction that uses the address on the stack to return to a previous stack frame and therefor a previous level in the call hierarchy. This means we can arbitrarily chain these gadgets and achieve arbitrary code execution if we find gadgets for our purpose.

**How to find Gadgets** A gadget can be found by searching for 0xC3 Bytes in the program. The instructions before then represent the code we can use, for that we need the address of the gadget. We could do this manually using tools like `objdump`, `hexdump` or use one of the many tools available, to name a few there is `ropper`, `ROPgadget` and `pwntools`. For this paper i will be using `ROPgadget` since i found it easy to use and fast. Using the following command **Lst. 1** under Linux we can dump all gadgets to a file and search in it using regular expressions, `ROPgadget` can be found in most package managers or can be downloaded directly from <https://github.com/JonathanSalwan/ROPgadget>.

Listing 1: Dumping all gadgets into a file

```
ROPgadget --binary ./vuln --nojob > gadgets
```

Using this command produces an output with results similar to this.

Listing 2: Output of `ROPgadget`

```

33 0x08059ee3 : mov word ptr [edx], ax ; mov eax, edx ;
34     ret
35 0x08071e4e : mov esp, 0xc70cec83 ; ret 0xffe0
36 0x0807faa3 : sti ; xor eax, eax ; ret
37 0x0808b285 : pop edx ; xor eax, eax ; pop edi ; ret
38 0x080539e7 : mov esp, 0x39fffffd ; ret
39 0x0804b8d4 : xchg eax, esp ; ret
40 0x08095aef : mov esi, eax ; pop ebx ; mov eax, esi ;
41     pop esi ; pop edi ; pop ebp ; ret
42 0x0806ceec : pop es ; add byte ptr [ebx - 0x39], dl ;
43     ret 0xffd4
44 0x0804a444 : or eax, 0xffffffff ; ret
45 0x08051bce : dec eax ; ret

```

These are only 10 Lines out of the 8244 lines found by the tool though and i purposefully filtered out some good and bad ones for demonstration. It is clearly visible that many candidates for ROP can be found, even in a file with a relatively small size of 72 kB. Though most of these gadgets are not all that useful because they often modify a lot of registers, possibly messing up the desired state or use a fixed return address. In most cases we can find suitable candidates using regular expressions though, this will be demonstrated later in this section.

### Overview of powerful gadgets

**pop** Pop allows us to write arbitrary values into registers. For that we search for a `pop <reg>` instruction inside our gadgets, in the payload we can then place the value after the address of the pop instruction. If we can not find a suitable gadget we can try to get creative and achieve the desired state another way. If for example we want to write some value into `ecx` we could use something like this: `xor ecx, ecx ; pop eax ; xor ecx, eax`. Provided that we have these gadgets available.

**mov** Mov allows us to write arbitrary values into memory. For that we search for a `mov dword ptr [<reg1>], <reg2>` instruction inside our gadgets, we can then, in combination with two pops write arbitrary values at arbitrary memory locations, we could use something like this to accomplish that: `pop ecx ; pop eax ; mov dword ptr [eax], ecx`

**arithmetics, boolean algebra** Arithmetic operations like `add`, `sub`, `inc`, `xor`, `or`, and can be useful to bring registers into our desired state. For that we search for the corresponding gadget with the required operands. For example `xor` can be used to clear a register or copy its contents. It often occurs in the following forms: `xor eax, eax` or `xor eax, edx`. The first case clears the register since `xor` computes a non-equivalence, formally  $a \oplus a = 0$  and the second one copies the value of the 2nd operand into the 1st operand when the target register is `0x00` since `0x00` is the neutral element of the `xor` operation, formally  $a \oplus 0 = a$ .

**int 0x80** `int` stand for an interrupt, the interrupt `0x80` causes a system call to be executed. System calls are kernelspace programs/operations that require higher privileges than what is available in a userspace program. Examples for system calls include `io` and `execve` which allows to execute arbitrary programs. In combination with `pop`, `mov` and other instructions we can specify the concrete system call. One of the most powerful system calls for blackhats is `bash` since it allows permanently implementing malware or gain insight into files, it can be called with the argument `/bin/sh`.

## 2.1 Filtering the gadgets

**Introduction** In order to find the gadgets we want we can use the tools directly or we can use regular expressions. In order to make this paper more general and easy to replicate i will be using regular expressions to find the desired gadgets.

**Gadgets and their corresponding Regular Expression** The following table describes what regex we can use to find the gadgets needed for the attack.

- `pop edx` → `^.{0,20}pop edx.{0,20}retn`
- `int 0x80` → `^.{0,20}int 0x80`
- `xor eax, eax` → `^.{0,20}xor eax, eax.{0,20}retn`

for all of these regular expressions i was able to find at least a few suitable candidates. If there are no results the amount of possible characters before or after the gadget can be increased until results show up. It is however desirable to have gadgets with as few and noninterfering instructions as possible, if this is accomplished we can almost use the instructions we found like in assembly. Gadgets which do multiple things at once however can mess up the desired state and break the payload so it is important to thoroughly analyze the gadgets before using them.

## 3 Theory

### 3.1 Stack

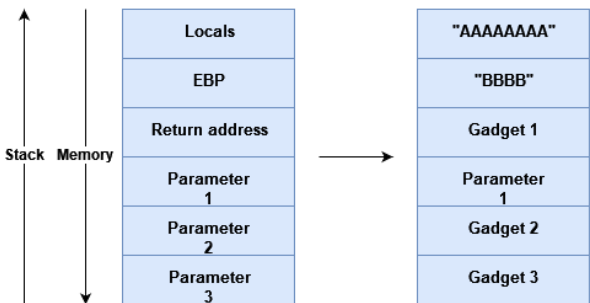


Figure 1: The stack when injecting the payload

### 3.2 ROP Chain

## 4 Attack

### 4.1 Target Program

**Target Program** The following program is the target of our attack, it uses a command line argument to provide the payload and `strcpy` for the buffer overflow, overwriting the return address after the 8 Byte buffer. Using vulnerable input functions also works though.

Listing 3: The Target Program

```

103 1 #include <stdio.h>
104 2 #include <string.h>
105 3
106 4 int main(int argc, char *argv[]) {
107 5     char buffer[8] = {0};
108 6     if (argc != 2) {
109 7         printf("A single argument is required.\n");
110 8         return 1;
111 9     }
112 10    strcpy(buffer, argv[1]);
113 11    return 0;
114 12 }

```

115 **Compilation** We use the following command to compile the target program

Listing 4: The compilation command

```

116 clang -o vuln vuln.c -m32 -g -fno-stack-protector -fno-pie -\
117 static

```

## 118 4.2 Phases of developing the attack

119 **Phases** The attack consists of several phases

- 120 1. Specify concrete goal with required program state and instructions
- 121 2. Generate desired list of instructions and arguments (abstract payload)
- 122 3. Extract gadgets using tools
- 123 4. Search gadgets for instructions
- 124 5. Generate payload using the gadgets according to the the abstract payload while  
 125 making sure gadgets dont interfere with our desired program state. This step can be  
 126 done using Python which we will show in a later section [Lst. 5](#)
- 127 6. Insert payload into target

128 **Goal and abstract payload** After specifying the goal and possibly simplifying it we have  
 129 to write a list of instructions and arguments that achieve the goal, for this its favorable  
 130 to directly use the format of the final payload except for using instructions instead of  
 131 addresses as this will then allow to simply insert the found gadgets into this abstract  
 132 payload.

133 **Extract and search gadgets** After extracting the gadgets using one of the above mentioned  
 134 methods we can search for gadgets  
 135 As described above you should

136 **struct.pack** `struct.pack` is a Python function that allows to easily generate our desired  
 137 payload from the raw bytes. Bash then allows to directly pipe the generated payload into  
 138 our target. In order to generate the payload we first have to fill the buffer and override  
 139 the EBP with arbitrary values as seen in line 2 [Lst. 5](#). This is usually done using easily  
 140 recognizable characters, using the letter A for this is common. It has the hex value `0x41`,  
 141 doing this allows then to spot the buffer in a debugger like `gdb`. So in this example we fill  
 142 the buffer with 8 A's and 4 B's. After that it is time to insert the addresses of the gadgets  
 143 and the arguments. This is done by calling `pack` with the double word (64 Bit) while

144 specifying the endianness, converting that to a string and adding it to the string as seen  
145 in line 3 Lst. 5. After the whole payload has been generated we can print it and use the  
146 output directly for running the buffer overflow attack as mentioned above.

Listing 5: How to use struct.pack

```
147 1 from struct import pack
148 2 p = bytes('AAAAAABBBB', 'ascii')
149 3 p += pack('<I', 0x0802840)
150 4 print(str(p)[2:-1])
```

## 151 5 Results

152 **Attack** After injecting the generated payload from Sec. 4 as a command line argument  
153 the program opened a shell from which we can use privilege escalation techniques in order  
154 to completely compromise the system. The only compiler options that had to be activated  
155 were PIE and stack canaries. It is likely that there are systems still in use today which are  
156 vulnerable to this kind of attack. Since it allows almost arbitrary code execution it is very  
157 important to identify these devices and patch or replace them.

158 **ASLR** The information about whether or not ROP can be applied to systems with ASLR  
159 enabled is inconsistent. In the run with PIE and stack canaries disabled the attack  
160 still worked even with `/proc/sys/kernel/randomize_va_space` set to 2, meaning full  
161 randomization of the different segments like header, libraries and stack. This is probably

## 162 6 Protection

163 Luckily we had to disable several security mechanisms to make this attack possible,  
164 especially

## 165 7 Discussion

166 Sources: [https://www.exploit-db.com/docs/english/28479-return-oriented-programming-](https://www.exploit-db.com/docs/english/28479-return-oriented-programming-(rop-ftw).pdf)  
167 [\(rop-ftw\).pdf](https://www.exploit-db.com/docs/english/28479-return-oriented-programming-(rop-ftw).pdf)