

# A Hybrid Approach for Control Flow Graph Construction from Binary Code

Minh Hai Nguyen

Department of Comp. Sci. and Eng.  
Hochiminh City Uni. of Industry  
Hochiminh City, Vietnam  
nguyenmhail984@gmail.com

Thien Binh Nguyen<sup>1</sup> and Thanh  
Tho Quan<sup>2</sup>

Department of Comp. Sci. and Eng.  
Hochiminh City Uni. of Tech.  
Hochiminh City, Vietnam  
<sup>1</sup>binhnguyenthien@gmail.com,  
<sup>2</sup>qttho@cse.hcmut.edu.vn

Mizuhito Ogawa

School of Information Science,  
Japan Advanced Institute of Science  
and Technology  
Ishikawa, Japan  
mizuhito@jaist.ac.jp

**Abstract**—Binary code analysis has attracted much attention. The difficulty lies in constructing a *Control Flow Graph* (CFG), which is dynamically generated and modified, such as mutations. Typical examples are handling dynamic jump instructions, in which destinations may be directly modified by rewriting loaded instructions on memory. In this paper, we describe a PhD project proposal on a hybrid approach that combines static analysis and dynamic testing to construct CFG from binary code. Our aim is to minimize false targets produced when processing indirect jumps during CFG construction. To evaluate the potential of our approach, we preliminarily compare results between our method and Jakstab, a state-of-the-art tool in this field.

**Keywords:** binary code analysis, static analysis, dynamic analysis, SMT, symbolic execution, control flow graph construction

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are several reasons to choose binary code as a program analysis target. First, once source codes are lost or unavailable, we need to directly analyze binary codes. Third party modules and computer virus are such examples. Second, a serious issue emerges from compiling from source codes to binary codes. A compiler may remove certain behaviors of programs, hence altering its contents or even its semantics [1].

Recently, there are a lot of tools and prototypes introduced for analyzing binary code. BINCOA [2] offered a framework for binary code analysis. Its core technology is a refinement-based static analysis [6] by abstract interpretation [7]. IDA Pro [3] is a commercial software, which has been used in many binary analysis platforms. Remarkably, Jakstab [4][5] is a state-of-the-art tool in the field of binary code analysis. It translates binary codes to a low level intermediate language in an on-the-fly manner and performs further analysis accordingly.

Fig.1 shows four major steps. The first step translates binary codes to disassembly codes. The second step builds an *intermediate representation* (IR) from the disassembly codes. The third step constructs the *Control Flow Graph* (CFG), whose vertices represent basic blocks of instructions and directed edges represent jumps in control flow [10]. Based on the constructed CFG, other analysis utilities like malware

detection or security checking will be further provided.

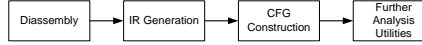


Fig. 1. Common steps for binary code analysis.

In Figure 1, the CFG construction step plays an essential role. Whereas CFG construction at an imperative language level is a classic work, that at the binary code level still remains a challenging task due to the following obstacles.

The first challenge lies in *Complex Instruction Set Computer* (CISC) [11] architectures, such as x86. They have very rich instruction sets, e.g., hundreds of instructions and thousands of operands combination in x86 architecture [12]. All of them must be interpreted properly to construct a CFG. The second challenge lies in the lack of desirable properties of *high level semantic structure*. For instance, there are no function abstraction and/or type at binary code level. Moreover, the issues of *code and data ambiguity*, *indirect branches* and *overlapping instructions* [13] are also burden. To overcome this problem, most of existing tools use static analysis with an over-approximation, resulting in a CFG with more false targets.

Inspired by [29], this paper proposes a hybrid approach which combines static analysis and dynamic testing for generating CFG from binary codes. We apply standard intra-procedural CFG generation until indirect jumps and/or function calls occur. Then, test data are generated to decide their precise destinations. Different from [29], we apply symbolic execution to generate appropriate test data. This hybrid method is neither sound nor complete, but will give a practically more precise CFG (even with mutation), compared to abstract interpretation based static analysis.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section II briefly describes a motivating example which shows problems of an over-approximation approach. Section III illustrates the overview of our hybrid framework. Section IV discusses in more detail our running examples to clarify the advantages of our method. Section V illustrates our research challenges in the subsequent PhD project. Section VI shows our preliminary

evaluation. Related works are presented in Section VII, and Section VIII concludes the paper.

## II. MOTIVATING EXAMPLE

Fig.2 presents an example illustrating the drawback of the over-approximation approach. We consider a code fragment starting at *Instruction 0*, where variable  $x$  is given a value randomly picked up from a set of  $\{10,15,30\}$ . When we convert this program into an abstract form, a typical approach is to use an interval to represent possible values of variables. In this case, the abstract value of  $x$ , denoted as  $a(x)$ , is represented as an interval of  $[10, 30]$ .

```

0: x = choice(10,15,30)
3: y = 4
6: jmp x
10: ...
15: ...
20: x = x + y
24: ...
26: ...

```

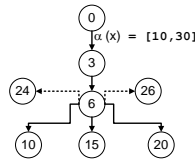


Fig. 2. CFG reconstructed by over-approximation abstraction

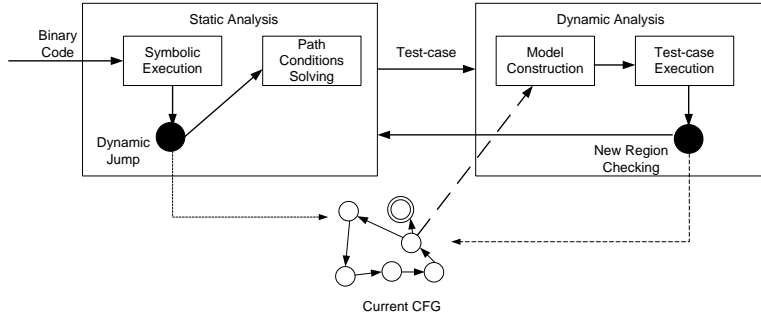


Fig. 3. The framework of combining static and dynamic analysis

In this framework, a program to be analyzed is divided into *regions*. Each region is a block of instructions which contains no dynamic jump instructions. **In Static Analysis phase, we use the technique of Symbolic Execution (SE) [14] to reconstruct execution paths in one region and create the corresponding sub-CFG of this region. This process of SE will perform in forward mannaer and stop when encountering an indirect branch.**

When encountering a dynamic jump, we execute *Path Condition Solving* to solve path conditions associated with an execution path in the current region. Then, test-cases are generated to cover all execution paths. In the meantime, the sub-CFG of the current region will be updated.

Subsequently, the *Dynamic Analysis* phase will be executed. In this phase, firstly the *Model Construction* will convert the

The major problem occurs when value of  $x$  is used as the target address of an *indirect jump* instruction at line 6. In the abstract program, since  $x$  can take any values in the interval of  $[10, 30]$ , there are several other *false branches* may be produced, illustrated as the dotted arrows in Fig.2. They come from an *over-approximation* based abstract interpretation.

There are many approaches to give a better abstraction. The false branch problem of an over-approximation is inevitable, and this is crucial for CFG generation of binary codes. For instance, mutation tries to lead such false branching. This issue motivates us to consider a new hybrid approach.

## III. THE PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

Fig.3 describes our framework, which consists of two phases: *Static Analysis* and *Dynamic Analysis*. They are executed alternatively until the convergence of CFG generation. .

current CFG into an intermediate form which enables us to simulate the execution process in the CFG. The execution of the test-cases previously generated will be simulated in this intermediate form in *Test-case Execution* step. It allows us to verify real targets of dynamic jumps, which are updated into the current CFG. If this indirect jumps to a new area, which has not yet been explored, the Static Analysis phase is invoked again with this newly-discovered region. Such combination of static and dynamic analysis is then repeated until there is no new area discovered.

## IV. EXAMPLES

### Example I: Handling dynamic jump

Fig.4 presents our first example where the analyzed program starts at address *start* and introduces an indirect jump at

**Comment [M1]:** Is SE performed forward or backward way? I thought it is backward.

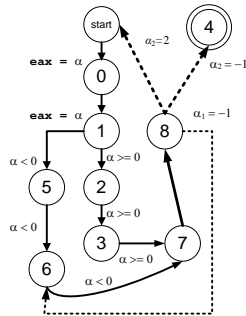
**Comment [v2]:** SE will be performed forward. I did clarify that

We apply a *prover* to generate two test-cases corresponding to these path conditions, which exemplarily are  $\alpha_1 = -1$  and  $\alpha_2 = 2$ . Executing the program with these two test-cases, we practically calculate the real targets of indirect branches for those two cases as *start* and *Instruction 6*. When dynamically following the path execution to *Instruction 6*, we continue discovering *Instruction 4* as a new target for the indirect jump. Hence, the full CFG of the program is constructed as illustrated in Figure 4, where the dotted arrows indicate new edges discovered by Dynamic Analysis phase.

In this example, we extend Example I to illustrate a more complex scenario. Listing 1 presents the program to be analyzed, which contains two indirect jumps at *Instruction 7* and *Instruction 16*. In addition, this code uses an *obfuscation* by inserting *dead code* from *Instruction 17* to *Instruction 19*.

```
start: ;reset eax
0: cmp eax, 0
1: jl lthen
lelse:
2: mov eax, offset start + 1
3: jmp lcont
lhalt:
4: halt

lthen:
5: mov eax, offset l1 + 4
l1:
6: sub eax, 3
lcont:
7: sub eax, 1
8: jmp eax
```



It must be remarked that if we apply static abstract interpretation, one typical method is to construct a set of interval covering all possible targets of *Instruction 7*, which are *start* and *Instruction 8*. Thus, the abstract interpretation would result the interval [*offset lstart*, *offset l1* + 12] as their possible addresses. Since this interval also includes addresses

```

start: ;Entry point
      0: cmp eax, 0
      1: jl lthen1
lelse1:
      2: mov ax, offset start - 1
      3: jmp lcont1

lthen1:
      4: mov ax, offset l1 - 12
l1:
      5: add eax, 11
lcont1:
      6: add eax, 1
      7: jmp eax

;;;;;;;; Dead code;;;
      17: cmp ebx,eax
      18: jz l4
      19: jmp eax
;;;;;;;;

```

Using test-case as in our method, this dead code will never be explored since there are no real execution paths through it. Instead, the Static Analysis phase is invoked again to continue analyzing the source code from *Instruction 8* to *Instruction 16* and generates the corresponding CFG for *Region 2*. When performing Dynamic Analysis for the indirect branch at *Instruction 16*, there are two possible targets which are addresses of *Instruction 0* and *Instruction 12*. Hence, we add a new edge from vertex 16 to vertex 0. Finally, since there are no newly-discovered regions, it stops and the final CFG is generated by combining Region 1 and Region 2.

The first challenge is to *handle path conditions* associated to each execution path of source binary code during symbolic

execution. Provers (SMT) solve the path conditions for test-case generation. The challenge encountered here is the computational limitation of provers. Current provers mostly cover only linear constraints for arithmetic. At binary code level, the types are arithmetic and the challenge lies in non-linear constraints, such as Z3.4.3 [20] and raSAT [18].

The next challenge is to *infer loop invariants*. This is a classic issue, and recently two methodologies (and their combinations) are popular. (1) *Loop invariants in arithmetic*. For a linear loop invariant, the technique based on *Farkas' lemma* [15] is common. For non-linear equational invariants, an algebraic method is known [33]. (2) *Loop invariants in first-order logic*. *Craig Interpolation* is known to be a good strategy to produce loop invariants [19].

The last challenge is to *simulate the program execution from the current CFG in Dynamic Analysis*. We are considering model checking for this issue, since once a CFG is obtained, conversion to a *Label Transition System* (LTS) is straightforward. Typically, from an LTS, a model checking tool will generate the corresponding state space by applying all of possible input values on the LTS and verify a certain properties on this state space. To ensure that the space is bounded, the input domain should be finite. In our work, we limit the input domain as the finite set of generated test-cases. We also do not verify any concrete property when having the model checking generate the state space from the LTS. Instead, we only follow the transitions made on the LTS with the input test-cases. If the LTS gets stuck with a certain input value, i.e. it cannot determine the destination state for a transition, this indicates that the original CFG needed to be enlarged with that input value.

Moreover, the program model generated by model checking can be used for further checking of other properties once the CFG is complete generated.

## VI. SMALL EXPERIMENTS

Small experiments are performed to evaluate the feasibility of our method with 5 example programs (some shown in Table 2) under the following constraints: (i) the code contains indirect jumps and (ii) the loop conditions are linear, which allowed us to handle them using Farkas' lemma. The average length of these programs was approximately 35 lines.

Our experiments are carried out in the following steps:

- (1) From given assembly code, we produce an initial CFG that consists only program entry.
- (2) We perform the intra-procedural CFG construction (or *static CFG construction* since we only process static jump instruction in this step) such that a CFG have program instructions as its vertices. There are 6 kinds of vertices defined, including *Start*, *Exit*, *Condition*, *Join*, *Loop* and *Other Instruction*. *Other Instruction* vertex covers the arithmetic instructions and move intructions of the assembly code.

We apply Jakstab to construct intra-procedural CFG. By default, Jakstab implements an on-the-fly method of static analysis on binary source code. Once encountering indirect branches, it applies abstract interpretation in order to resolve possible target addresses. We manually replace this step as to stop Jakstab when a dynamic jump is found, and apply step (3).

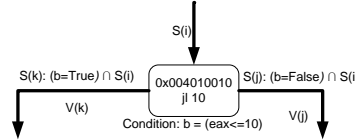


Fig. 6. Generating symbolic conditions for a *Condition* vertex

(3) We perform the symbolic execution on the current CFG. In order to do that, we build a simple symbolic execution framework to handle a subset of x86 instructions. For each edge in the CFG, we compute a symbolic condition, which is a necessary condition to have an execution path through this edge. For instance, Fig.6 illustrates the symbolic conditions generated when handling a *Condition* vertices of the CFG. Symbolic conditions for *Start*, *Exit*, *Condition*, *Join*, and *Other Instruction* vertices are straightforward. For *Loop* vertices, Farkas' lemma is used to infer a loop invariant.

(4) We apply Z3.4.3 [20] to solve path conditions (given in step (3)) which are associated to paths reaching to the indirect jump vertices, and to generate test-cases to cover them.

(5) We use PAT [17] to generate a LTS from the current CFG and dynamically perform the test-cases on it. After PAT is performed, the output of PAT to estimate the targets of the indirect jumps are manually analyzed. Then, the CFG is (manually) enlarged with the estimated targets.

(6) If the CFG is enlarged in step (5) with fresh vertices, return to step (2). Otherwise, the construction finished.

Fig.7 illustrates CFGs generated by Jakstab and our method in one testing program. The average runtime of Jakstab to process a program is less than one seconds. Although the test programs are just toy programs, Jakstab still fails to resolve the target addresses of dynamic jumps. For the program in Table 2, the CFG generated by Jakstab stopped at the indirect jump at location 21. Using our approach, the analysis process proceeds and achieves the full CFG. This holds for all 5 test programs, while Jakstab fails all due to the dynamic jumps.

**Comment [M3]:** Could you explain to me? I am bit confused. Symbolic execution for static analysis, and model checking for dynamic analysis? Sounds opposite. Maybe this relates to the questions in the left column. I may miss some points.

**Comment [v4]:** I think that you consider Testing as a Dynamic Analysis, and therefore you consider SE as a part of Dynamic Analysis (use SE to generate test-case).

In our design, Static Analysis involves everything needed to do until the test-case are generated.

Then, Dynamic Analysis is just simply performing the test-case in a formal approach (we may want avoid actually running the source code). In order to do so, we convert the CFG into LTS and have a model checking tool to "perform" the LST with the test-cases.

**Comment [v5]:** i tried to explain in more details how we employed model checking to do a testing job

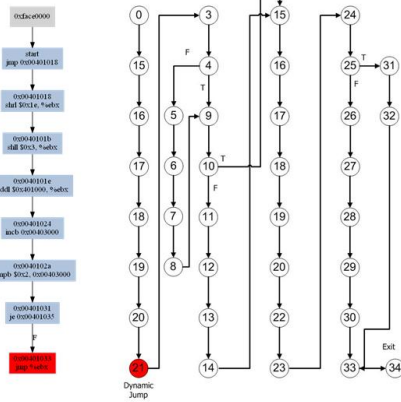


Fig. 7. The CFGs generated by Jakstab (left) and by our method (right)

## VII. RELATED WORKS

### 1. Hybrid approaches for program analysis

The approach of using hybrid method by combining static analysis and dynamic testing to analyze imperative program has been considered in many related works. In the field of software testing, *concolic testing* [21][22][23][24] is a well-known technique, which combines symbolic execution and dynamic execution to generate test-case.

.data	18: inc counter
counter db 0h	
.code	19: cmp counter, 2
start: ; Entry point	20: je l3
0: jmp l2	<b>21: jmp ebx</b>
1: inc edi ;dead code	
2: mov edi, 1 ;dead code	
3: cmp al, 2	l3:
4: jle l1	22: shr eax,31
5: nop	23: add eax, 401043h
6: nop	24: cmp ebx,eax
7: nop	25: jz l4
8: nop	26: jmp eax
l1:	27: nop
9: cmp al, 2	28: add eax,ebx
10: jge l2	29: sub ebx,eax
11: nop	30: jmp l5
12: nop	l4:
13: nop	31: add ebx,eax
14: nop	32: sub eax,ebx
l2:	l5:
15: shr ebx, 30	33: xor eax,eax
16: shl ebx, 3	34: invoke ExitProcess,0
17: add ebx, 401000h	
	end start

Table 2 – Source code of the experimental file

SLAM tool [25] is based on an automatic analysis of client code to validate a set of properties or find a counter-example showing a fail execution. DART [26] provides a new approach

for completely automatic unit testing for software to avoid stubs that simulate the external environment of software. SYNERGY algorithm [27] presents a new approach to combine static and dynamic program analysis for property checking and test generation. DUALYZER is a dual static analysis tool [28], which is based on only over-approximation for both proving safety and finding real bugs.

### 2. CFG construction from binary code

There are many methods of extracting CFG from binary source code. Gogul Balakrishnan and Thomas Reps introduced value-set analysis (VSA) [9]. By using numeric and pointer-analysis algorithm, VSA computes an over-approximation of the set of numeric values or addresses that every location may hold. This analysis technique was implemented in a tool called CodeSurfer [8][9], which is an extension from IDAPro [3].

Combination of static analysis and dynamics analysis is a noticeable approach introduced in [29]. As static analysis techniques are over-approximation or under-approximation, these techniques cannot resolve all targets of indirect jumps. Some numerical abstract domains as interval,  $k$ -sets, etc. are used handle jump targets, but none of them meet both criteria of the accuracy and the complexity. Recently, there is a refinement-based method [6] that helps to reconstruct CFG more precise. However, using  $k$ -sets with cardinality bound, this method still fails in many cases.

In BINCOA, a technique based on dynamic symbolic execution [14] and bit-vector constrain solving [30][31] are introduced. Meanwhile, IDA Pro relies on linear sweep decoding (the method of brute force decoding all addresses) and recursive traversal method [32] (decoding recursively until an indirect jump is approached) for disassembly.

### 3. Binary analysis based on model-checking

Beside the approach of abstracting the memory addresses to reconstruct the CFG, another approach is to describe malicious functions possibly caused by virus using temporal logic, thus enabling virus detection using model checking. CTL (Computation Tree Logic) provides a solid foundation to formally present system behaviors, based on which CTPL is proposed for to specify some certain obfuscation actions of virus [36][37][38]. Further, Song and Touili extend CTPL as SCTPL to better describe stack-based actions of viral behaviors [34]. Recently, LTL (Linear Temporal Logic) is suggested to replace CTL since LTL can be more precise to capture behaviors of malwares. SLTPL is then introduced to reflect this idea [35]. They mostly consider the situation without dynamic jumps, e.g., mutation.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper preliminarily reports a proposal for PhD work. The initial goal of this work is to produce a more precise CFG from binary codes. The difficulty to decide the precise destinations of indirect branchings remains as a major problem in the field. We proposed a hybrid approach, which combines an over-approximation by static analysis and an under-approximation by dynamic testing to achieve practically more accurate results. Initial results showed that our method is quite

promising. We expect that our approach does not only help on the issue of indirect branches but also be later improved as a new efficient method for analyzing binary source code.

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