



Web timing attacks

Day 12: If I can't steal their money, I'll steal their joy!

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## Learning Objectives

- *Understand the concept of race condition vulnerabilities*
- *Identify the gaps introduced by HTTP2*
- *Exploit race conditions in a controlled environment*
- *Learn how to fix the race*

## Web Timing and Race Conditions

Web applications often have vulnerabilities due to logical flaws or timing issues. Timing-based vulnerabilities can occur even when sending valid inputs, exploiting subtle differences in how requests are processed.

### Key Concepts

1. **Web Timing Attack:** Observing response times to glean unauthorized information.
2. **Race Conditions:** Exploiting timing issues to trigger unintended application behaviors.

### Examples of Timing Attacks:

- **Information Disclosures:** Extract sensitive data like usernames based on timing differences.
- **Race Conditions:** Manipulate operations like fund transfers to cause duplicate or invalid transactions.

## The Rise of HTTP/2

HTTP/2 introduced new features to improve web performance but also exposed applications to unique vulnerabilities if not implemented correctly.

## Key HTTP/2 Features and Challenges:

- **Single-Packet Multi-Requests:** Enables stacking multiple requests in a single TCP packet, eliminating network latency as a factor.
- **Improved Timing Analysis:** Allows precise timing analysis by isolating server latency.

These advancements make it easier to detect timing vulnerabilities but also increase the risk of race condition exploitation.

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## Typical Timing Vulnerabilities

1. **Information Disclosures:**
  - Response delays reveal sensitive data.
  - Example: Timing-based username enumeration.
2. **Race Conditions:**
  - Exploit processing gaps for unintended actions.
  - Example: Applying a discount multiple times by sending requests in quick succession.

A key difference in web timing attacks between **HTTP/1.1** and **HTTP/2** is that HTTP/2 supports a feature called single-packet multi-requests. Network latency, the amount of time it takes for the request to reach the web server, made it difficult to identify web timing issues. It was hard to know whether the time difference was due to a web timing vulnerability or simply a network latency difference. However, with single-packet multi-requests, we can stack multiple requests in the same TCP packet, eliminating network latency from the equation, meaning time differences can be attributed to

different processing times for the requests. This is explained more in the animation below:



With network latency a thing of the past, only server latency remains, making it significantly easier to detect timing issues and exploit them to recover sensitive information.

## Typical Timing Attacks

Timing attacks can often be divided into two main categories:

- **Information Disclosures**
  - Leveraging the differences in response delays, a threat actor can uncover information they should not have access to. For example, timing differences can be used to enumerate the usernames of an application, making it easier to stage a password-guessing attack and gain access to accounts.

Race conditions are similar to business logic flaws in that a threat actor can cause the application to perform unintended actions. However, the issue's root cause is how the web application processes requests, making it possible to cause the race condition.

For example, if we send the same coupon request several times simultaneously, it might be possible to apply it more than once.

For the rest of this task, we will focus on race conditions. We will take a look at a **Time-of-Check to Time-of-Use (TOCTOU)** flaw. Let's use an example to explain this, as shown in the animation below:



When the user submits their coupon code, in the actual code of the web application, at some point, we perform a check that the coupon is valid and hasn't been used before. We apply the discount, and only then do we update the coupon code to indicate that it has already been used. In this example, between our check if the coupon is valid and our update of the coupon being used, there are a couple of milliseconds where we apply

the coupon. While this might seem small, if a threat actor can send two requests so close together in time, it might happen that before the coupon is updated in request 1,

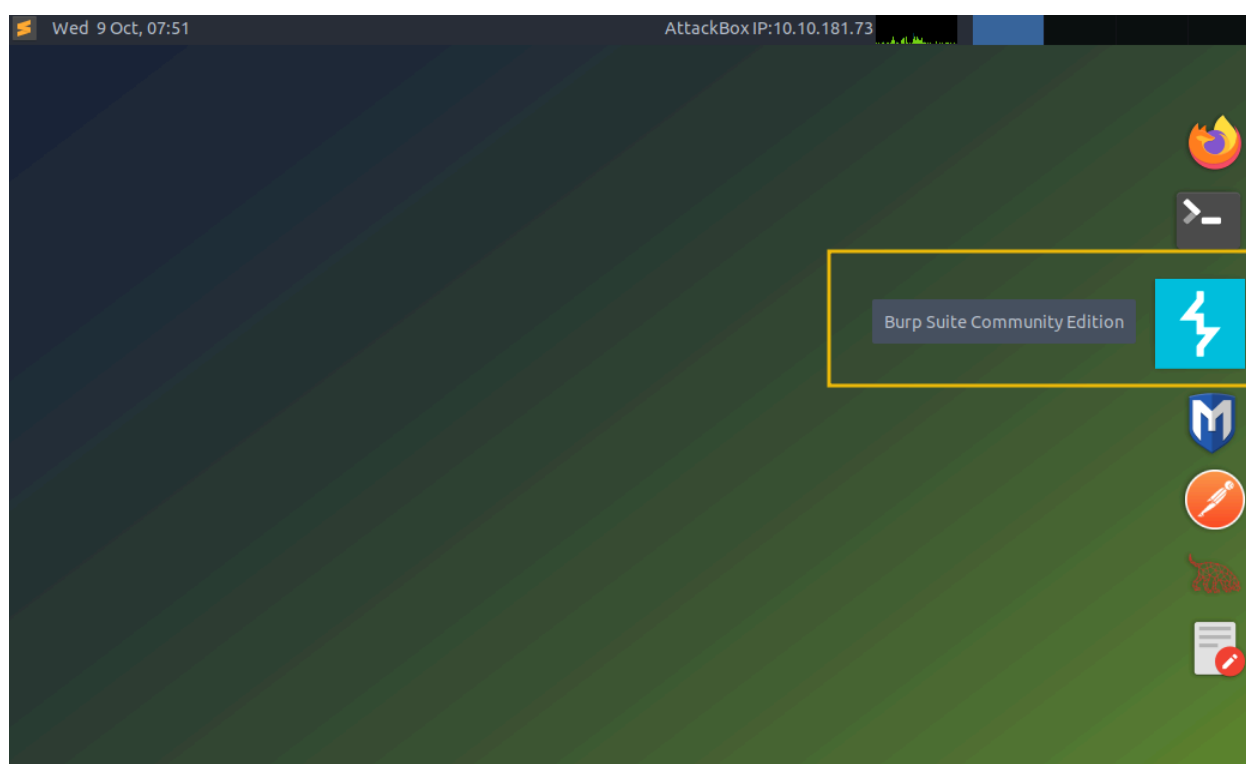
it has already been checked in request 2, meaning that both requests will apply the coupon!

## Winning the Race

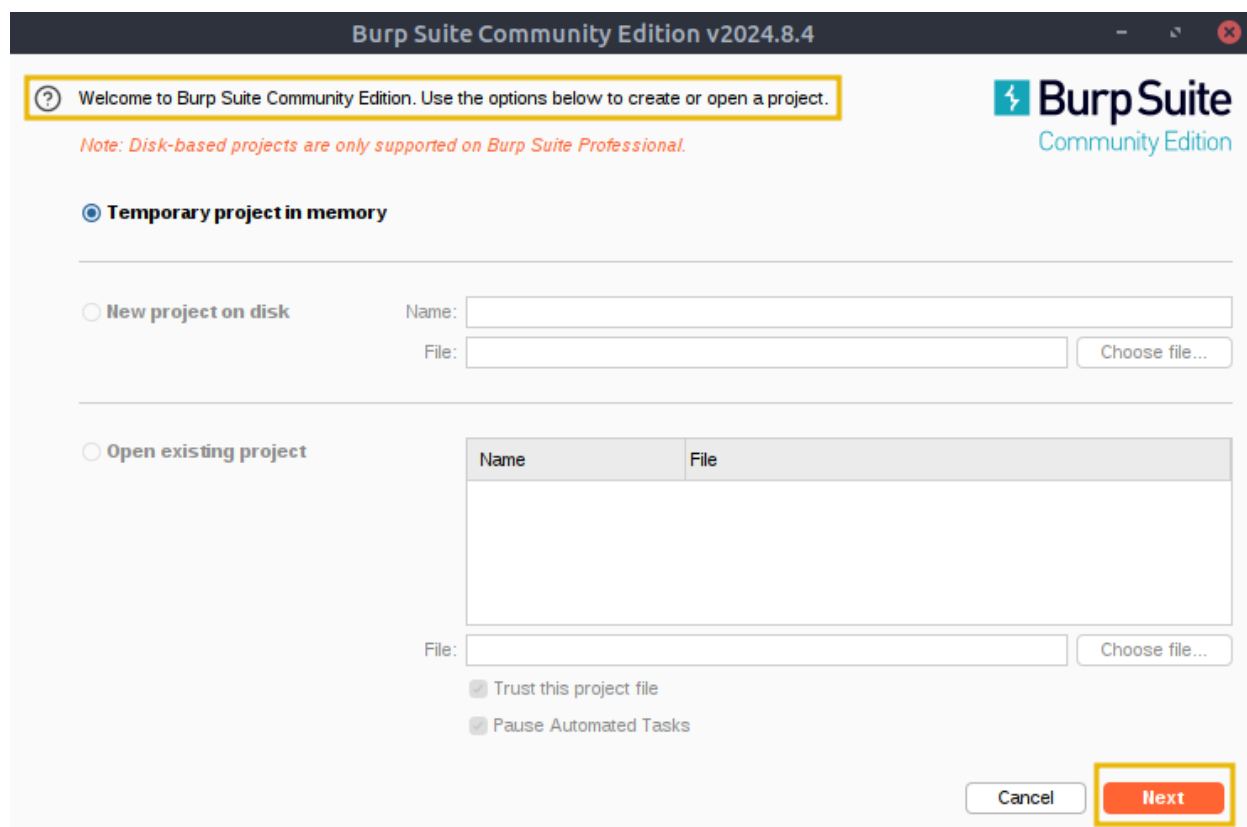
Now that you understand basic concepts related to race conditions, let's explore how this vulnerability occurs in a real-world scenario. For this, we will take the example of the Warville banking application hosted on `http://MACHINE_IP:5000/`. This application allows users to log in and transfer funds between accounts.

## Intercepting the Request

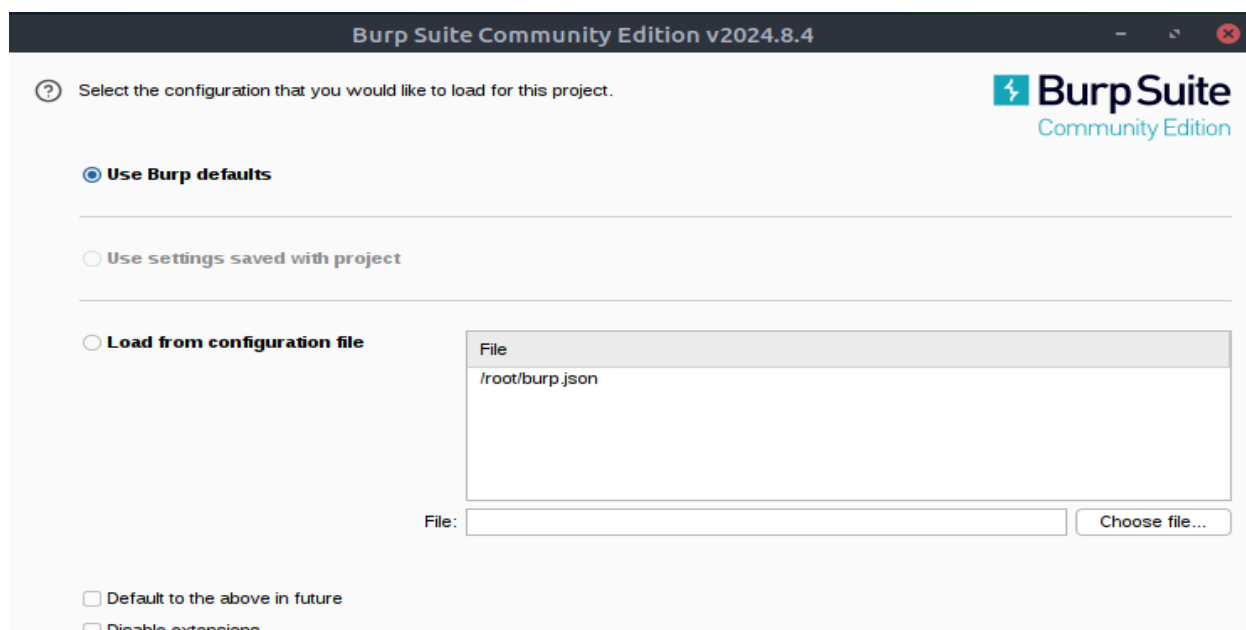
- Configure your browser to route traffic through **Burp Suite**.
- Open Burp Suite and set up the environment:
  - Enable "Allow Burp's browser to run without a sandbox" in settings.
  - Start the pre-configured Burp browser and visit `http://MACHINE_IP:5000/`.



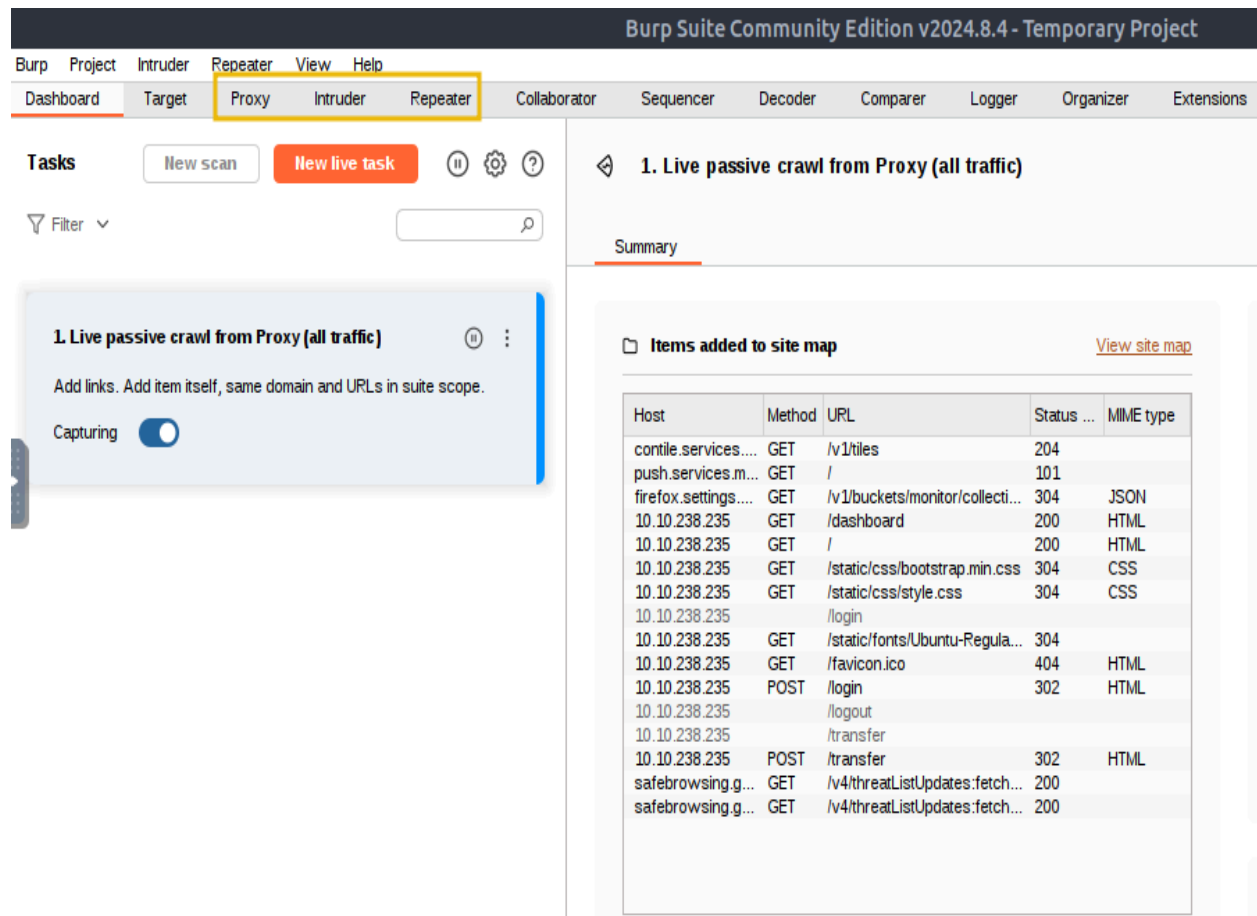
Once you click the icon, Burp Suite will open with an introductory screen. You will see a message like **"Welcome to Burp Suite"**. Click on the **Next** button.



On the next screen, you will have the option to **Start Burp**. Click on the **Start Burp** button to start the tool.

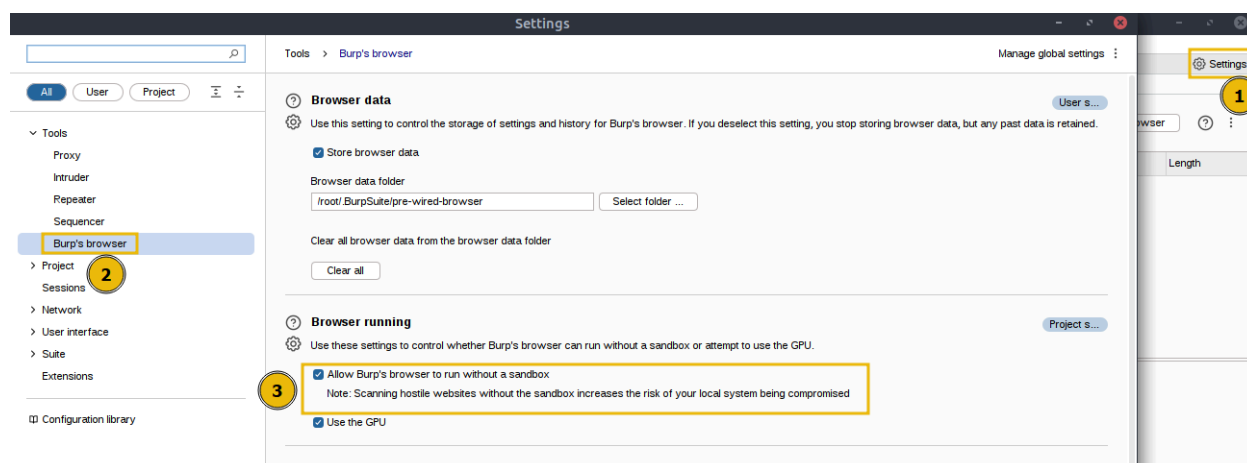


Once Burp Suite has started, you will see its main interface with different tabs, such as Proxy, Intruder, Repeater and others.

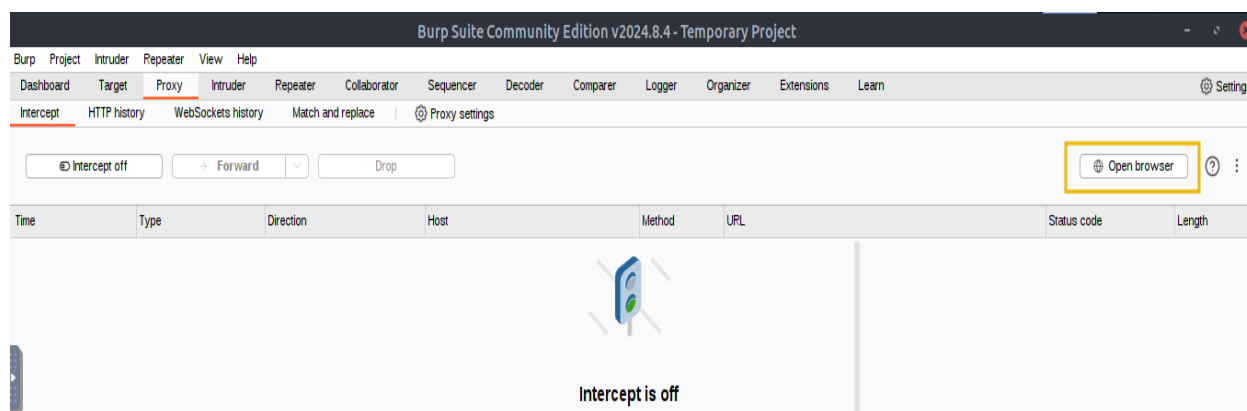


Inside Burp Suite, click the Settings tab at the top right. You will see Burp's browser option available under the Tools. Enable Allow Burp's browser to run without a sandbox option and click on the **close icon** on the top right corner of the Settings tab as shown below:

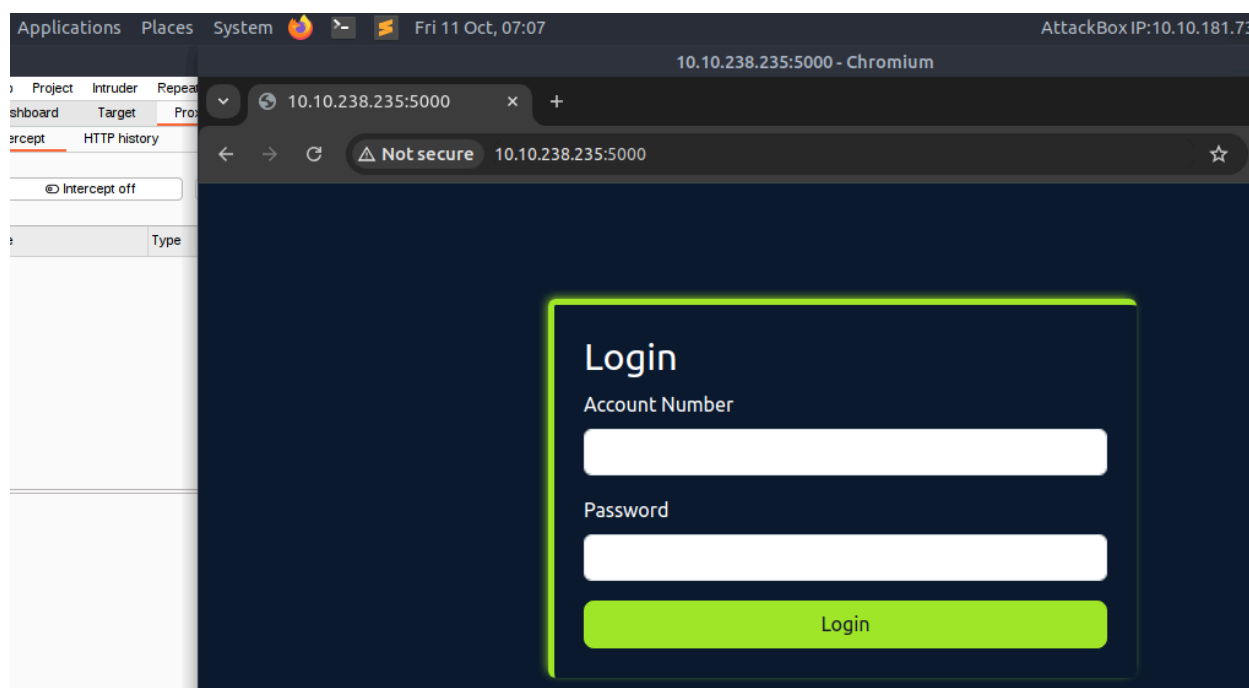




After allowing the browser to run without a sandbox, we would now be able to start the browser with pre-configured Burp Suite's proxy. Open the browser by clicking the **Open browser** located in the **Proxy** -> **Intercept** tab and browse to the URL `http://MACHINE IP:5000`, so that all requests are intercepted:



Once you browse the URL, all the requests are intercepted and can be seen under the **Proxy**->**HTTP history** tab.



## Application Scanning

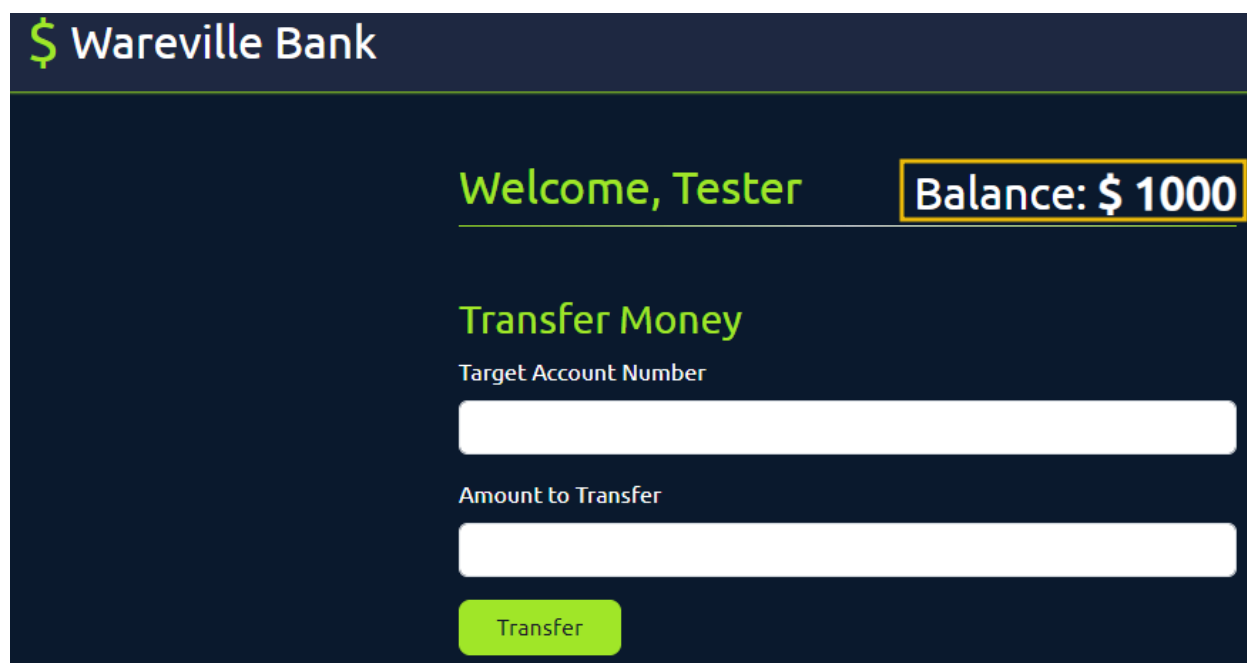
As a penetration tester, one key step in identifying race conditions is to validate functions involving multiple transactions or operations that interact with shared resources, such as transferring funds between accounts, reading and writing to a database, updating balances inconsistently, etc.

For this example, we will log in to the Warville banking application using the credentials:

**ACCOUNT NO : 101**

**PASSWORD : tester**

Once logged in, you will see the following dashboard that will contain the following two primary functions:




The screenshot shows the Wareville Bank web application. At the top left is the logo "\$ Wareville Bank". On the right, it says "Welcome, Tester" and "Balance: \$ 1000". Below this is a section titled "Transfer Money". It contains two input fields: "Target Account Number" and "Amount to Transfer". At the bottom of this section is a green button labeled "Transfer".

- You will see two functionalities: **logout**, which probably does not involve simultaneous tasks. The next is **fund transfer**, which includes deducting funds from the account and adding them to the other account. As a pentester, this could be an opportunity for an attack. We will see in detail how, as a pentester, you can test/exploit the vulnerability.

## Verifying the Fund Transfer Functionality

- We will browse the bank application and perform a sample transaction inside the browser. This will generate multiple **GET** and **POST** requests, and whatever request we make will be passed through the Burp Suite. As shown in the figure, our current balance is **\$1000**. We will send **\$500** to another bank account with the account number **111**, and while doing that, all our requests will be captured in the Burp Suite.



# Welcome, Tester

# Balance: \$ 1000

## Transfer Money

Target Account Number

Amount to Transfer

Transfer

Click on the Transfer button, and you will see the following message indicating that the amount has been transferred:

# Welcome, Tester

# Balance: \$ 500

Success! Transaction ID: 05311655a15b75fab86956663e1819cd

## Transfer Money

Target Account Number

- Now, let's review the fund transfer **HTTP POST** request logged in the Burp Suite's **HTTP history** option under the **Proxy** tab.

The screenshot displays the Burp Suite interface. At the top, the 'Proxy' tab is selected, and the 'HTTP history' sub-tab is active. A table lists recent HTTP requests. The third request (highlighted with a yellow box and a circled '3') is a POST request to the URL '/transfer' with a status code of 302 and title 'Redirecting...'. Below the table, the 'Request' pane shows the raw HTTP request details, including headers like 'Origin', 'User-Agent', 'Referer', and 'Cookie', and the body parameters 'account\_number=111&amount=500' (highlighted with a yellow box and a circled '4'). The 'Response' pane shows the raw HTTP response, including status '302 FOUND', headers like 'Server', 'Date', 'Content-Type', and 'Set-Cookie', and the body content 'Redirecting...'.

#	Host	Method	URL	Params	Edited	Status code	Length	MIME type	Extension	Title	Notes	TLS
20	http://10.10.238.235:5000	GET	/static/fonts/Ubuntu-Regular.ttf			304	288		ttf			
17	http://10.10.238.235:5000	GET	/dashboard			200	2736	HTML				
3	http://10.10.238.235:5000	POST	/transfer		✓	302	630	HTML		Redirecting...		
18	http://10.10.238.235:5000	GET	/static/fonts/Ubuntu-Regular.ttf			304	288		ttf			
12	http://10.10.238.235:5000	GET	/dashboard			200	2528	HTML				

**Request**

Pretty Raw Hex

```

Origin: http://10.10.238.235:5000
Content-Type: application/x-www-form-urlencoded
Upgrade-Insecure-Requests: 1
User-Agent: Mozilla/5.0 (Windows NT 10.0; Win64; x64) AppleWebKit/537.36 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome/129.0.6668.71 Safari/537.36
Accept: text/html,application/xhtml+xml,application/xml;q=0.9,image/avif,image/webp,image/apng,*/*;q=0.8,application/signed-exchange;v=b3;q=0.7
Referer: http://10.10.238.235:5000/dashboard
Accept-Encoding: gzip, deflate, br
Cookie: session=eyJyZWllIjojVGZkdGVyIiwidXNlciI6MTUwZjZlLWt-Ozc
Connection: keep-alive
account_number=111&amount=500

```

**Response**

Pretty Raw Hex Render

```

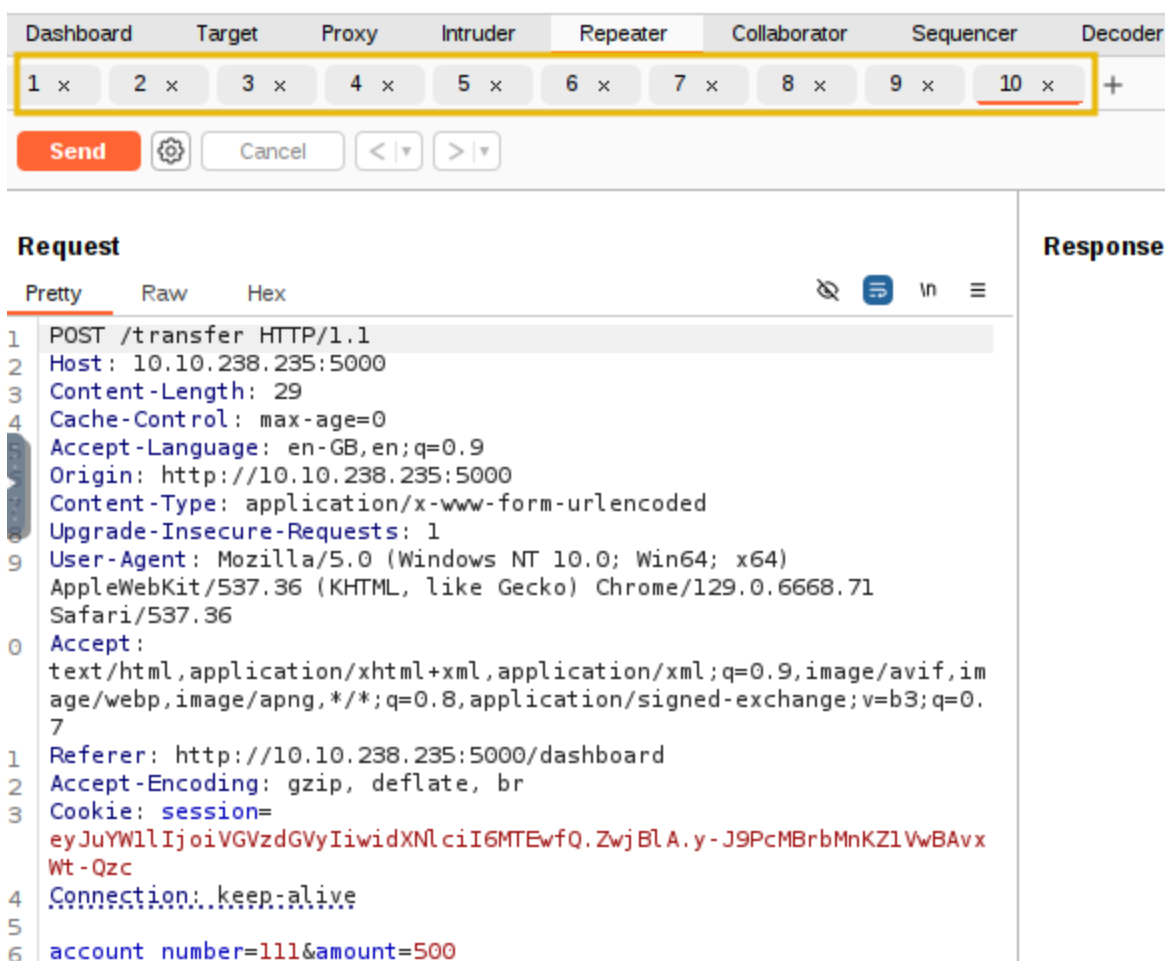
1 HTTP/1.1 302 FOUND
2 Server: Werkzeug/3.0.4 Python/3.8.10
3 Date: Fri, 11 Oct 2024 06:13:40 GMT
4 Content-Type: text/html; charset=utf-8
5 Content-Length: 207
6 Location: /dashboard
7 Vary: Cookie
8 Set-Cookie: session=.eJvNyzEKgDAMRuGrxB9HkZW6TV0ESFQowSawWkn8e52-njDe7Hu1.9ipBj-_oFzBrWZyKDqMJYQaDU1Jou2akm7UDs5RfkhCeErMxMw9lm_pEOVWeExqWVPd1lU8s_t--wghNA.ZwjCFA.9NcSPqDqR8T8L906rB06zZ9ywII; HttpOnly; Path=/
9 Connection: close
10
11 <!doctype html>
12 <html lang=en>
13 <title>
    Redirecting...
14 </title>

```

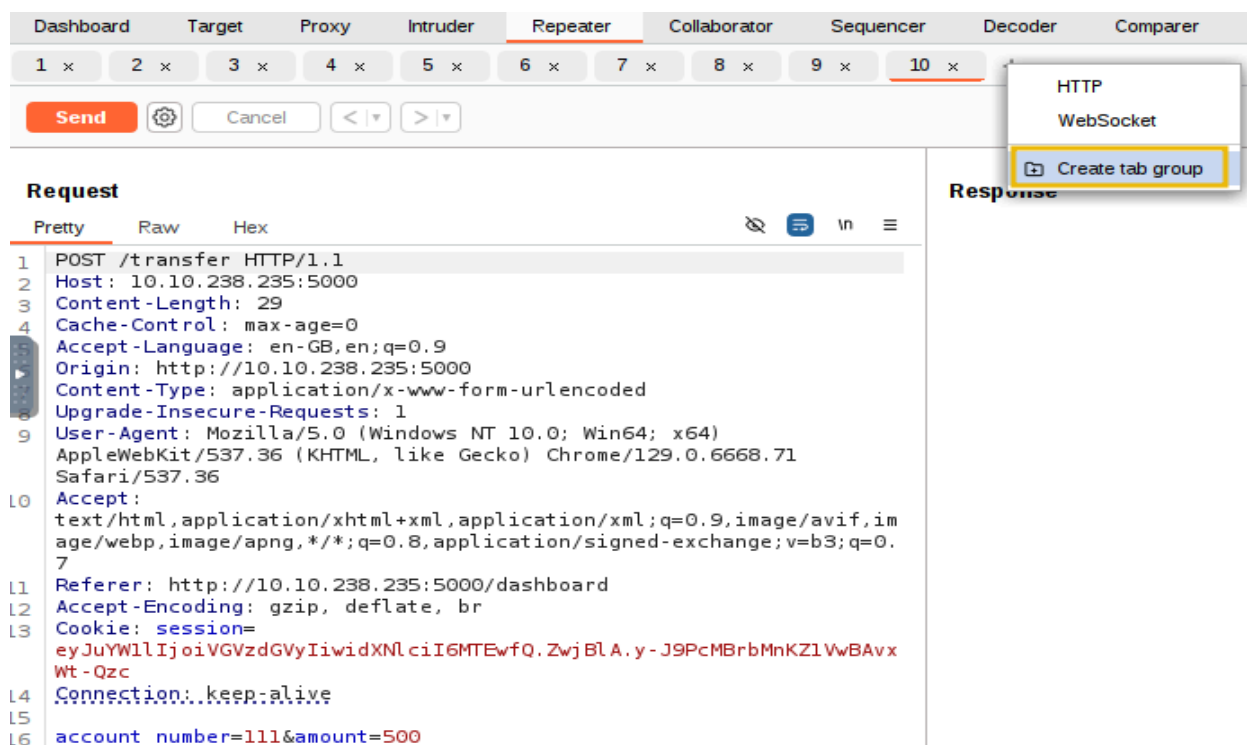
The above figure shows that the **/transfer** endpoint accepts a POST request with parameters **account number** and **amount**. The **Burp Suite** tool has a feature known as **Repeater** that allows you to send multiple **HTTP** requests. We will use this feature to duplicate our **HTTP POST** request and send it multiple times to exploit the race condition vulnerability. Right-click on the POST request and click on **Send to Repeater**.

- | Dashboard | Target | Proxy | Intruder | Repeater | Collaborator | Sequencer |
|-----------|--------|-------|----------|----------|--------------|-----------|
|-----------|--------|-------|----------|----------|--------------|-----------|

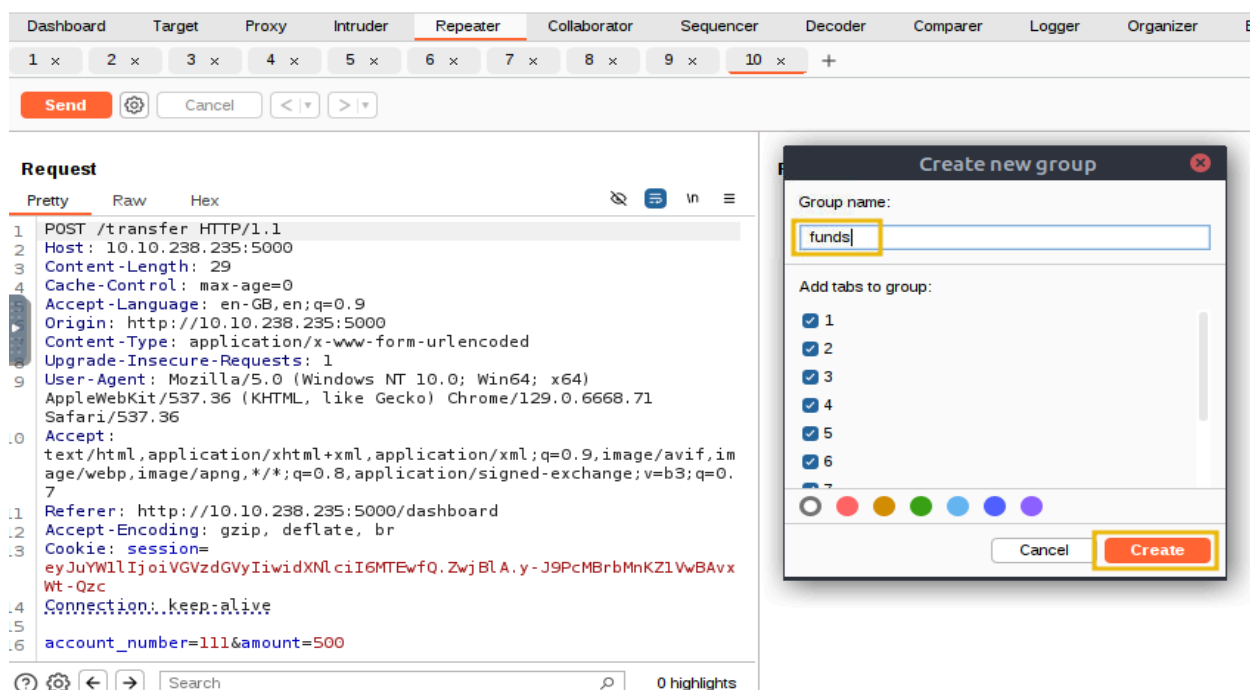
Place the mouse cursor inside the request inside the Repeater tab in Burp Suite and press **Ctrl+R** to duplicate the tab. Press **Ctrl+R** ten times to have 10 duplicate requests ready for testing.



Now that we have 10 requests ready, we want to send them simultaneously. While one option is to manually click the **Send** button in each tab individually, we aim to send them all in parallel. To do this, click the **+** icon next to **Request #10** and select Create tab group. This will allow us to group all the requests together for easier management and execution in parallel.

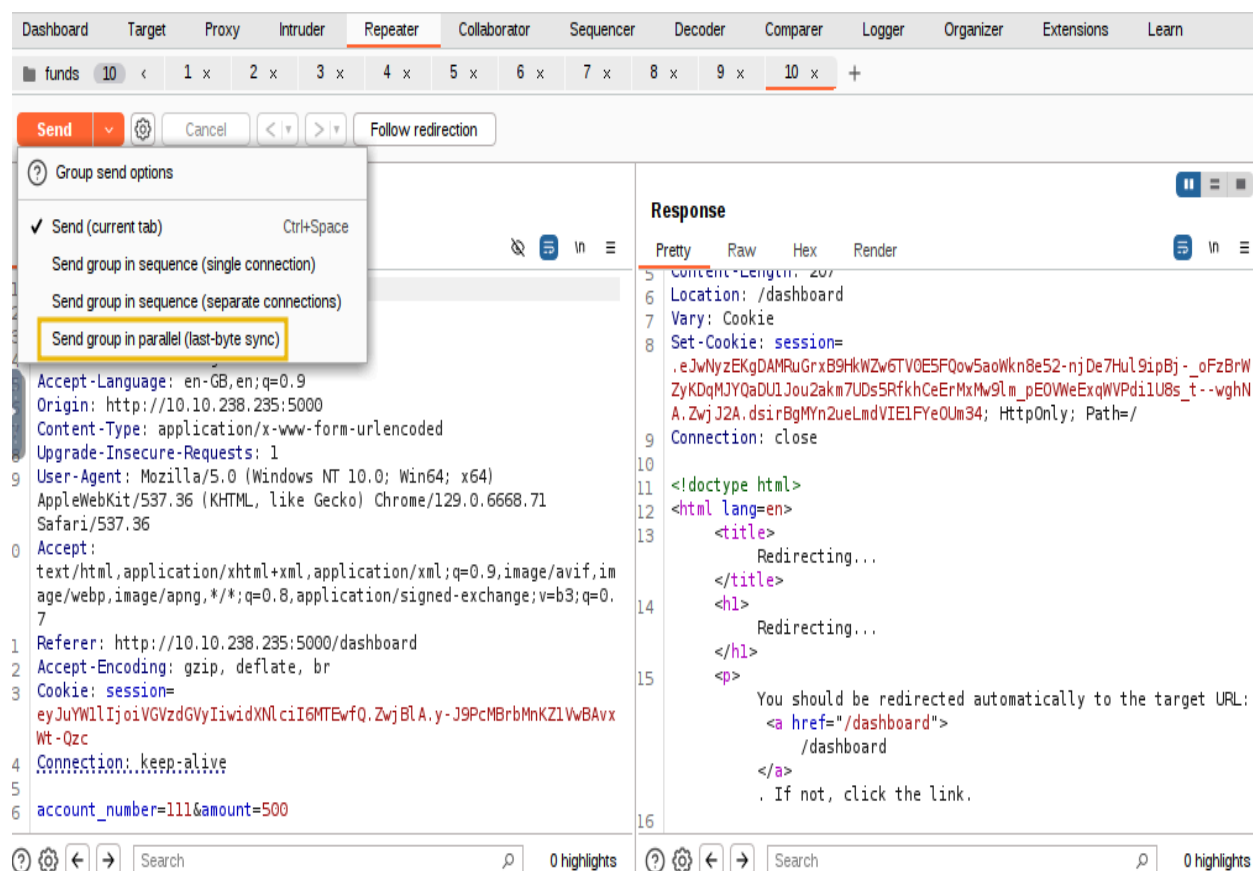


After clicking the **Create tab group**, a dialogue box will appear asking you to name the group and select the requests to include. For this example, we will name the group **funds**, select all the requests, and then click the **Create** button, as shown below.

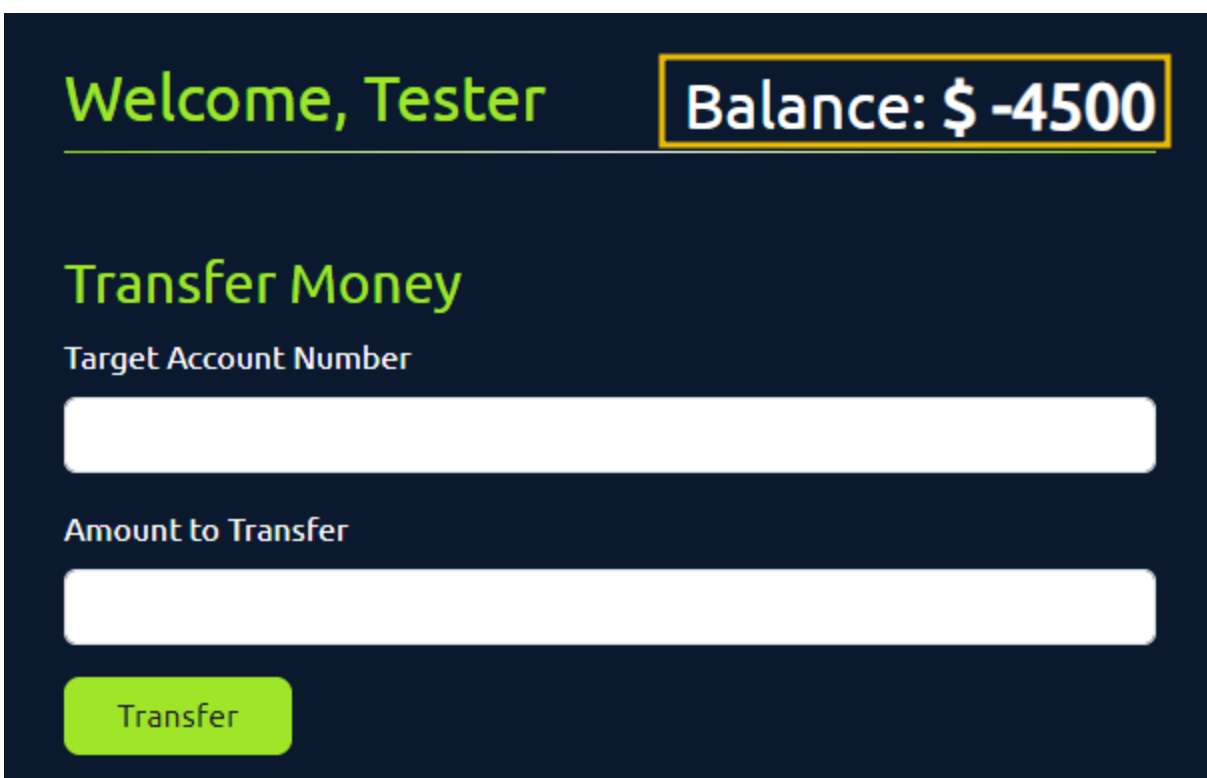




Now, we are ready to launch multiple copies of our HTTP POST requests simultaneously to exploit the race condition vulnerability. Select **Send group in parallel (last-byte sync)** in the dropdown next to the **Send** button. Once selected, the **Send** button will change to **Send group (parallel)**. Click this button to send all the duplicated requests in our tab group at the same time, as shown below:



Once all the requests have been sent, navigate to the **tester** account in the browser and check the current balance. You will notice that the tester's balance is negative because we successfully transferred more funds than were available in the account, exploiting the race condition vulnerability.



The screenshot shows a dark blue web interface. At the top left, it says 'Welcome, Tester' in green. To the right, a yellow-bordered box displays 'Balance: \$ -4500' in white. Below this, the heading 'Transfer Money' is in green. There are two white input fields: the first is labeled 'Target Account Number' and the second is labeled 'Amount to Transfer'. At the bottom left, there is a green button with the text 'Transfer'.

By duplicating ten requests and sending them in parallel, we are instructing the system to make ten simultaneous requests, each deducting \$500 from the `tester` account and sending it to account `111`. In a correctly implemented system, the application should have processed the first request, locked the database, and processed the remaining requests individually. However, due to the race condition, the application handles these requests abruptly, resulting in a negative balance in the tester account and an inflated balance in account `111`.

## Verifying Through Source Code

Suppose you are a penetration tester with access to the application's source code (as in a white-box testing scenario). In that case, you can identify potential race condition vulnerabilities through a code review. By analysing the code, you can pinpoint areas where multiple database operations are performed without proper transaction handling. Below is the Python code that handles the fund transfer:

```

if user['balance'] >= amount:
    conn.execute('UPDATE users SET balance = balance +
? WHERE account_number = ?',
                (amount, target_account_number))
    conn.commit()

    conn.execute('UPDATE users SET balance = balance -
? WHERE account_number = ?',
                (amount, session['user']))
    conn.commit()

```


In the above code, if `user['balance'] >= amount`, the application first updates the recipient's balance with the command `UPDATE users SET balance = balance + ? WHERE account number = ?`, followed by a commit. Then, it updates the sender's balance using `UPDATE users SET balance = balance - ? WHERE account number = ?` and commits again. Since these updates are committed separately and not part of a **single atomic transaction**, there's no locking or proper synchronisation between these operations. This lack of a **transaction or locking mechanism** makes the code vulnerable to race conditions, as concurrent requests could interfere with the balance updates.

## Time for Some Action

Now that you understand the vulnerability, can you assist Glitch in validating it using the account number: `101` and password: `glitch`? Attempt to exploit the vulnerability by transferring over **\$2000** from his account to the account number: `111`.

## Fixing the Race

The developer did not properly handle concurrent requests in the bank's application, leading to a race condition vulnerability during fund transfers. When multiple requests were sent in parallel, each deducting and transferring funds, the application processed



them simultaneously without ensuring proper synchronisation. This resulted in inconsistent account balances, such as negative balances in the sender's account and excess funds in the recipient's account. Here are some of the preventive measures to fix the race.

- **Use Atomic Transactions:** The developer should have implemented atomic database transactions to ensure that all steps of a fund transfer (deducting and crediting balances) are performed as a single unit. This would ensure that either all steps of the transaction succeed or none do, preventing partial updates that could lead to an inconsistent state.
- **Implement Mutex Locks:** By using Mutex Locks, the developer could have ensured that only one thread accesses the shared resource (such as the account balance) at a time. This would prevent multiple requests from interfering with each other during concurrent transactions.
- **Apply Rate Limits:** The developer should have implemented rate limiting on critical functions like funds transfers and withdrawals. This would limit the number of requests processed within a specific time frame, reducing the risk of abuse through rapid, repeated requests.