

Plan for a Master's Project

Project Plan Version: 0.1.1 (first draft).

Note: underlined (italic) text is original 'template text'. Like this text below.

This note gives an outline for the structure of a plan for a Master's project for the Master in Software Engineering. Each student should produce a plan according to the template given below, discuss it with the supervisors and the host organization and get it approved.

Project title:

Detecting injection vulnerabilities in PHP. (TODO: more concise, provide better scope when available.)

Give a concise, one-line, description of the project

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Host organization and group:

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Project summary:

According to the TIOBE index, PHP the 6th most popular programming language.

PHP is used in about 4.6% of all programs.

PHP is difficult to fully analyze because PHP is a dynamic programming language.

Due to variable includes, variable variables, variable function calls, variable callback functions and eval function, it is hard to make call graphs by static analysis.

In PHP it is possible to write code that will have injection vulnerabilities. This injection can happen from the outside (through user input) or from the inside (by programming structures).

In this thesis I will try to find methods to analyze PHP code to identify injection vulnerabilities. I hope to find a way to measure accurately and keep the false positive and false negatives to the minimum.

To be able to provide Werkspot results of this research, I want to display the analysis on the software in a readable format. This month (January) I want to investigate if it is possible to create a plugin for an existing analysis tool (for instance in Sonarqube) to provide extra information on the software analysis done by the analysis tool.

(TODO: Make more concise when more information is found. Remove things like 'I will try to find'.)

Give a short (at most 1 page) description of the project. Make sure that the following issues are

covered:

- The global context of the project.
 - The relevancy of your research.
 - The specific research questions to be answered in the project.
- Explain the project.

Problem analysis:

The website of Werkspot is created in 2005 and evolved afterwards. New features and components are added over time. The frameworks (Symfony and Zend Framework) on which Werkspot is build are no longer supported. Because Werkspot strives for external (product quality, user experience) and internal (code quality/complexity) quality, the existing code should be upgraded to a newer framework (Symfony 2).

Symfony 2 is a light weight framework which should lead to better maintainable code, because the code will be easier to read and have less coupling. This should raise the internal quality of the software reduce the maintenance costs.

In the legacy code of the old framework, Werkspot is interested in the software parts which contain the most complex code, security-, and/or performance issues. When Werkspot is provided with indication numbers on complexity, security and performance, Werkspot can decide what components should be replaced before other components.

(TODO: add PHP analysis problem description, more related to the assignment.)

Here you present your analysis of the problem situation that your research will address. How does this problem manifest itself at your host organization? Also summarizes existing scientific insight into the problem (result of your literature survey, see below).

Research method:

The difficulty in this research is that PHP is a dynamic language and therefor had to fully statically analyze PHP code.

I expect from the literature survey to get answers on how to analyze PHP code and how injection detecting/locator algorithms are applied in other programming languages. Algorithm of other programming languages might be applicable to PHP. The source of my literature will be academic literature.

The research I will do is to see how I can analyze PHP code to find injection vulnerabilities.

The proof of concept I will create is a small program to detect injection problems in PHP by a few simple test cases. This will for instance be injection problems in variable function calls, variable variables and eval usage.

I think the search method will be Action Research, which is defined as: "the researchers attempt to solve a real-world problem while simultaneously studying the experience of solving the problem". (TODO: this needs to be confirmed. Might be an experiment or case study. Not sure about this.)

Hypothesis are to be defined. (TODO: define hypothesis)

Timeline:

- Jan: literature study, project plan, proof of concept.
- Feb-Mei: write thesis, find injection vulnerabilities using method(s) x(,y)
(TODO: find out how I will do this.).
- Jun-Jul: finish thesis, present the data to Werkspot in usable form (as information, not data).

The validation of the research will be done by creating a number of test cases with different injection problems and test cases without injection problems. With these test I will be able to verify the used method and will be able to identify false positive and false negative results.

Another option to validate the results is to compare the results with existing tools to find injection. For this validation I will use the tools: x, y, z (TODO: add tools to validate, these are to be defined.)

Present how you are going to find the answers to your research question. This chapter should cover:

- What will make the research difficult?
- What is the input you expect from the literature survey
- What sources will you use and how will you use / document them?
- What experiments / research will you do?

What proof of concept will you make?

- What method will you use?
- Which hypothesis do you have?
- Present a time line
- How will you validate your research?

Expected results of the project:

- Successfully being able to correctly find injection vulnerabilities.
- Present the results in a readable way to Werkspot, for instance as a Sonarqube plugin, so Werkspot can use it to analyze their software.
- High quality thesis.

Give an explicit list of all the results that are expected from the project.

Required expertise for this project:

- PHP language knowledge
- Research validation (using statistics?)
- ...
- (TODO: More to be defined.)

Give a list of the expertise that is needed for the successful completion of this project. Examples are:

- Java programming
- Make and Makefiles
- Configuration management
- Testing
- Etc., etc.

Timeline:

(TODO: when more detailed knowledge of the plan is known, update the timeline with more details.)

Jan: write project plan, finish: 31 jan.

Feb: write thesis, detect injection in PHP.

Mrt: write thesis, detect injection in PHP.

Apr: write thesis, detect injection in PHP.

May: write thesis, detect injection in PHP, provide results.

Jun: write thesis, provide results.

Jul: write thesis, provide results.

Aug: room for possible delay.

An overview of what activity will take place when, and what milestones/deadlines the project has.

Risks:

(TODO: update these risks when more information is available.)

- Project goals are too ambitious.
- Project goals are not concise enough.
- Used method provides insufficient results to detect injection.
- (TODO: Make the items above measurable, like SMART. Will do this when more project information is available.)

Give an assessment of the risks for this project and present counter measures. These may include:

- Project goals are too ambitious.

- Project goals are too vague.
- The information about the project is unavailable/incomplete/too difficult.
- The gap between your expertise and the required expertise is too large

Literature survey (can also be a separate document):

(TODO: will be added from latex. For every paper I read, I will write a log with important/relevant information. For all relevant papers, I will write the relevant parts.)

Describe the following for related scientific literature on your topic:

- Brief summary of contents.
- Relation to your topic: how does the work described in the reference differ from your approach, what results have they obtained, what open questions do they still have?

A guideline is to include between 10 and 20 papers on your topic in the survey. The exact number depends on the topic and available literature.

Bibliography:

(TODO: will be added from latex)