CITS3007 Secure Coding C language, intro to buffer overflows

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- ► C language topics which bits of C should you know?
- Systems programming refresher privilege levels and system calls
- Vulnerabilities buffer overflows
 - the Morris Internet worm

C language refresher

Importance

Although created over 50 years ago, the C language has a privileged place in the software industry.

- Most modern operating systems (e.g. Linux, Windows and macOS) are written in C
 - their interfaces are defined in C
- Many programming languages have their primary implementation in C (e.g. Python, JavaScript, Lua, Bash)
- ► As a result, C often serves as a "lingua franca" when extending languages or developing programs written in multiple languages
 - For instance, the Python language can be extended by writing new built-in modules in C.

Features

C was created as an efficient systems programming language, and was first used to re-write portions of the Unix operating system so as to make them more portable.

It aims to give the programmer a high level of control over the organization of data and the operations performed on that data.

It inherited some features from the language PL/I, but unfortunately in some cases opted for less security than did PL/I.

For instance, buffer overflows (which we look at shortly) were rare in PL/I, as it required that programmers always specify a maximum length for strings: 1 C does not implement this feature.

¹Karger & Schell (2002)

Language standards

We will largely discuss the C11 standard, which is still in widespread use.

That said, as long as your code compiles and runs correctly using the standard CITS3007 development environment, you are welcome to use the C17 version of the language if you wish.³

²ISO/IEC 9899:2011. See ISO/IEC 9899:201x at https://www.open-std.org for a draft version.

³gcc can be instructed to use C17 by passing -std=c17 to the compiler.

Language references and texts

- If you're pretty familiar with C:
 - ► The ISO/IEC C11 standard is a bit wordy, and the vocabulary takes a bit of getting used to - but it's not that difficult to follow, and it's the final word on what a legal C11 program should do.
 - https://cppreference.com actually has very good coverage of C header files and functions. Just make sure you're reading the right one.
 - ▶ from a corresponding C++ page, follow the "C language" links down the bottom of page
 - C language topics should have a URL that looks like https://en.cppreference.com/w/c/SOMETHING
- Otherwise, the CITS2002 Systems Programming website has good recommendations on (both free and non-free) C textbooks: https://teaching.csse.uwa.edu.au/units/CITS2002/c-books.php

Integers in C

C has a large number of integral data types.⁴ The most common are:

standard integer types

- standard signed integer types: signed char, short int, int, long int, and long long int
- standard unsigned integer types: _Bool (also available as bool), unsigned char, unsigned short int, unsigned int, unsigned long int, and unsigned long long int
- the char type.

What range of integers these can hold, and which of these types are equivalent to each other, is implementation dependent.

⁴In fact, nearly every type you see in this unit (besides function types) is either an integer type, or derived from (array or struct or pointer to) integer types.

standard integer types

- standard signed integer types: signed char, short int, int, long int, and long long int
- standard unsigned integer types: _Bool (also available as bool), unsigned char, unsigned short int, unsigned int, unsigned long int, and unsigned long long int
- the char type.

The C11 standard states that the char type is equivalent to *either* signed char or unsigned char, but which one is the case is implementation-defined.

It says the size of a char is one byte, and has at least 8 bits, but *doesn't* otherwise constrain how many bits exist in a byte (this, too, is implementation-defined).⁵

⁵The CHAR_BIT macro in <limits.h> will tell you the number of bits per byte. On Unix-like OSs, the macro NBBY, defined in <sys/param.h>, will give the same result.

Floating point types

C also has three "real floating types", but we will be less concerned with them.

real floating types

- ▶ float
- double
- long double

(It also has three corresponding types for complex numbers, which we won't use at all.)

Functions in C

All executable statements in C must be written inside a procedure – C calls its procedures "functions".

C functions may return a result, in which case the signature of the function will indicate the return type. For instance:

```
int square(int x);
```

The function declared above takes one argument (an int), and returns an int value.

Functions in C

```
void print_int_to_terminal(int x);
```

Alternatively, a function may be declared as having return type void, in which case it *doesn't* return any value as a result.

Both void and non-void functions may have *side effects*: they may for instance modify the values of global variables, perform output to the terminal, or alter the state of files or attached devices.

Function declarations and definitions

A function declaration "tells" code following it about a function:

```
int square(int x);
```

A function **definition** provides the "body" of the function:

```
int square(int x) {
  return x * x;
```

Scope in C

C has two basic types of scope:

- global scope (or "file scope"): for variables declared outside all functions. These are visible from the declaration, to the end of the file
- block scope: for variables declared within a function or statement block. These are visible from the declaration, to the end of the function or statement block.

For global variables (and for functions, which are always global – C doesn't have nested functions): adding the keyword static before them ensures that the variable or function is *only* visible from within that file.

Limiting scope is C's primary method of implementing information hiding.

Scope in C

```
global, usable
                 from
                               global, this
 in any file
                                 file only
               another file
    int OUR_NUM = 42;
    int OTHER_NUM ;
    static int OUR_PRIVATE_NUM ;
    int multiply (int m, int n) {
                                                    local variable
         int i, res = 0; <----</pre>
                                                     declarations
         for (i = 0; i < n; i++) {
                                                    local to block
            int tmp = res + m;
            res = tmp;
         }
         return res;
```

Arrays in C

C provides support for 1-dimensional and multi-dimensional arrays.

1-dimensional array

```
#define ARRAY_SIZE 10
int some_array[ARRAY_SIZE];
```

2-dimensional array

```
#define ARRAY_HEIGHT 5
#define ARRAY_WIDTH 10
int two_d_array[ARRAY_HEIGHT][ARRAY_WIDTH];
```

Strings in C

C does not provide a separate datatype for strings — rather, strings are considered to be arrays of chars, with the NUL character (which has ASCII code 0) acting as a terminator.

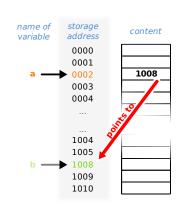
```
String

// this declaration:
char my_str = "cat";

// is equivalent to:
char my_str[4] = { 'c', 'a', 't', '\0'};
```

Pointer types in C hold a reference to an entity of some other type. For instance a "pointer to int" (written int *) holds a reference to an int.

It's usually convenient to think of this "reference" as the address of a location in memory, but the C11 standard does not require that to be the case.



A pointer and the variable it references¹

¹Image courtesy of Wikipedia,

C allows the use of **pointer arithmetic**. In addition to performing (say) addition on two integer values, we can perform it on one pointer value and one integer value.

```
int * p1 = NULL;
int * p2 = p1 + 4;
```

Adding 4 to a pointer doesn't move it along by 4 memory locations; it moves it along by $4 \times$ the size of whatever is being pointed to (an int, in the example above).

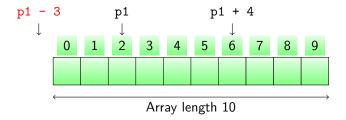
We can also subtract one pointer from another, and perform equality and inequality comparisons on two pointers (==, <, >, <=, and >=).

Many languages disallow pointer arithmetic, since its use can easily result in invalid pointers (pointers that do not reference a properly initialized object of the correct type).

C allows it; it is up to the programmer to ensure they comply with the standard's rules as to when a pointer is valid.

If the programmer fails to comply with those rules, the result usually is that the behaviour of the program is *undefined*.

(In other words: the program has no well-defined "meaning", according to the C11 standard; and the standard places no constraints on what behaviour it may have.)



For instance: if arithmetic is performed on a pointer which references some element of an array, and the resulting pointer would go outside the bounds of the array, ⁶ then the behaviour of the program is undefined.

⁶To be precise: the pointer must point either to an element of the array, or the position one past the last element.

A pointer to a variable can be obtained using the '&' ("address-of") operator, and pointers can be dereferenced using '*' (the dereference operator).

Variables have a storage duration that determines their "lifetime".

- Memory for global variables is allocated when the program starts running, and persists until the program exits
- However, the majority of variables in a program are local variables, and have what is called "automatic storage duration"
 - This basically means they "disappear" when the function they are declared in exits, and the memory allocated to them is reclaimed
 - If you've somehow managed to hang onto a reference to this memory, the behaviour of your program is *undefined*

Automatic lifetime and dangling pointers

Consider this function:

```
int * myfunc() {
  int a_local_var = 36;
  int * a_pointer = &a_local_var;
  return a_pointer;
```

There's nothing wrong with returning a pointer – lots of functions do it (like the standard function getenv - char* getenv (const char* name) which gives you the value of an environment variable).

But a caller of myfunc will receive a pointer to memory which has been reclaimed – a "dangling pointer" – and such a pointer results in undefined behaviour.

dangling pointers

```
myfile.c
int * myfunc() {
  int a_local_var = 36;
  int * a_pointer = &a_local_var;
  return a_pointer; \to dangling pointer
```

Compilers will generally not warn you about this – the above code compiles with gcc -pedantic -Wall -Wextra with no warnings.

Code static analyzers exist which will warn you – more about them, later.

e.g. clang-tidy myfile.c will give the output

```
1 warning generated.
myfile.c:4:3: warning: Address of stack memory associated with local
variable 'a_local_var' returned to caller [clang—analyzer—core.StackAddrEscapeBase]
  return a_pointer;
```

Dynamically allocated memory

- Data which we want to persist beyond the execution time of a function needs either to be global, or to be allocated in a region of memory called the heap.
- Memory allocated on the heap is said to be "dynamically allocated"
- The primary C functions used to manage dynamic memory are
 - malloc, for allocating memory, and
 - free, for releasing it.

```
void *malloc(size_t size);
void free(void *ptr);
```

Dynamically allocated memory

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <stdlib.h>
int* make_arr(int n) {
  int* arr = malloc(n * sizeof(int));
  return arr;
int main() {
  int n:
  printf("How big an array to allocate? ");
  scanf("%d",&n); // insecure, prefer scanf_s
  int* arr = make_arr(n);
  for(i = 0; i < n; i++)
    arr[i] = n:
  free(arr);
```

Dynamically allocated memory

Once a pointer has been freed, using that pointer's value at all even without dereferencing it – is undefined behaviour.

```
int *p = malloc(sizeof(int));
free(p);
if (p == NULL) {
 // ...
```

- So is calling free on a pointer more than once.
- Attempting to read from malloced memory before it has been initialized results in an "indeterminate value" - not undefined. but almost certainly not what you want

Memory: call stack

On most architectures, calls to C functions work something like this:

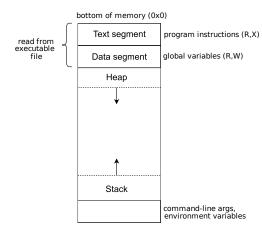
- Every time a C function starts executing, space is allocated for its parameters and local variables on the call stack
 - for each function that is entered, a stack frame gets pushed onto the call stack
 - the stack frame consists of enough memory to store the function parameters, local variables and a record of where to return to
 - when the function is exited, a stack frame gets taken off the call stack

top of stack

```
void draw_line(point* p1, point* p2){
// ...
void draw_rect(point* topLeft, point* botRight){
 point p1 = {.x=topLeft->x, .y=topLeft->y };
 point p2 = {.x=botRight->x,.y=topLeft->y };
 draw_line(&p1, &p2);
 // ...
```

draw line locals stack frame for where to return to draw line draw line parameters draw rect locals stack frame for where to return to draw rect draw rect parameters

The layout of a process's data in virtual memory looks something like this.



On Linux, cat /proc/some_pid/maps shows the virtual address space of a process. (Try cat /proc/self/maps to get the address space of the cat process itself.)

The **text** segment is typically made *shareable*, so that multiple processes can be run from one executable file and share a single copy (safe, since it's read-only).

Typedefs

C allows types to be given "aliases", using the typedef keyword.

The original type comes *first*, then the alias.

```
typedef int colour;
```

Structs

C provides structs to create composite data types ("product types") in which a related set of variables can be grouped together in one contiguous block of memory.

```
struct address {
  char * street number:
  char * street_name;
  char * suburb:
  int postcode;
};
void my_func() {
  // we can initialize ...
  struct address some_addr = { // like this:
      "13a", "Cooper St", "Nedlands", 6009
  };
  struct address other_addr = { // or like this (since C99)
      .postcode = 6009, .suburb = "Nedlands",
      .street_number = "13a", .street_name = "Cooper St"
  };
```

Structs and typedefs

Often for convenience, a struct is combined with a typedef.

```
typedef struct { // define an anonymous struct
  char * street_number:
  char * street_name;
  char * suburb:
  int postcode;
} address; // and give it a name
// now we can just use "address", instead of
// "struct address".
void my_func() {
  address some_addr = { "13a", "Cooper St", "Nedlands", 6009 };
```

Struct members

```
typedef struct {
  char * street_number;
  char * street_name;
  char * suburb;
  int postcode;
} address;
```

struct members can be accessed using the "." (member access) operator.

If, rather than a struct, you have a *pointer* to a struct, you can use the "->" (member access through pointer) operator.

```
void my_func(struct address a, struct address *pa) {
  printf("postcode of a: %d\n", a.postcode);
  printf("postcode of pa: %d\n", pa—>postcode);
}
```

enums

C allows user-defined data types which assign meaningful names to integral constants:

```
enum shape_operation {
  draw = -1,
  move,
  delete = 4,
  hide
};
```

Enumerated types are *integer types*, and so can be used anywhere an integer could be. As a result, they offer no real *type safety*: nothing distinguishes an enum shape_operation from (say) a signed int.⁷

⁷Each enumerated type is compatible with some *integral* type which can hold all the values, but it's implementation-defined what type that is.

Unions

A C union may hold *multiple* different types, of different sizes – but only one type at a time.

For instance, suppose we receive a "blob" of data from over the network which represents a message. The first 8 bits (1 byte) are a code that tell us what the rest of the "blob" means:

- 0 indicates it's a double
- ▶ 1 indicates it's an int

Unions

We could use the following to represent these messages:

```
union double_or_int {
  double d;
  int i;
};
struct message {
  char message_type;
  union double_or_int;
};
```

Unions

```
union double_or_int {
  double d;
  int i;
};

struct message {
  char message_type;
  union double_or_int;
};
```

We can then correctly decode a message with code like this:

```
void decode_message(struct message * m) {
  if (m.message_type == 0) {
    double d = m->d;
    printf("It's a double: %f\n", d;
} else if (m.message_type == 1) {
  int i = m->i;
    printf("It's an int: %d\n", i;
}
```

Unions – a problem

```
void decode_message(struct message * m) {
  if (m.message_type == 0) {
    double d = m->d;
    printf("It's a double: %f\n", d;
} else if (m.message_type == 1) {
    int i = m->i;
    printf("It's an int: %d\n", i;
}
}
```

We've assumed here that a char is 8 bits in size. And on every reasonable platform available today, it is (but see here).

If we want to make sure, we can use C11's **static** assert feature to verify the size.

```
#include <assert.h>
#include <limits.h>
// This will be checked at compile time.
static_assert(CHAR_BIT == 8, "only works if a char is 8 bits");
```

Function pointers

Pointers to functions can be passed around and used in C.

The syntax for function pointers is not especially pleasant.

```
// pointer to a void function taking an int
void (*func_ptr)(int);
void use_ptr(void (*p)(int)) {
  p(42); // call pointed—to function
void print_num(int n) {
  printf("the number is %d\n", n);
int main() {
  func_ptr = print_num;
  use_ptr(func_ptr);
```

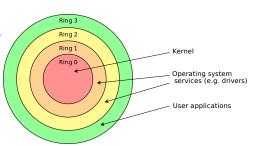
Operating system services

Privilege levels

Access to devices, particular data, or some CPU instructions may be protected by hardware - only sufficiently privileged code (e.g. kernel code) may access them.

(Why? Suppose all user applications could directly access the disk hardware at any time. The filesystem would be in danger of becoming corrupted. The OS manages orderly access to the hardware.)

For instance, Intel's processors provide 4 privilege levels, conceptualized as rings, where inner rings are the most "trusted", and outer rings the least.



Privilege levels

A user application is normally executed at a low level of privilege, and is prohibited from accessing or modifying the memory of other programs, or resources belonging to inner rings; attempting to do so triggers a particular type of *fault* (which can be thought of as a sort of "exception"), e.g. a general protection fault.

System calls constitute the "API" of an operating system kernel – they are the programmatic way to request a service from the kernel.

They allow code running in one of the outer levels (user programs) to obtain a service from one of the inner levels.

An example system call:

the open system call on Unix-like systems opens a file for reading or writing.

```
int open(const char *pathname, int flags, mode_t mode);
```

System calls

From a programmer's point of view, system calls "look" like functions; however, rather than having a normal function body, they typically are implemented as assembly code routines, which do the following:

- store all the information the kernel needs to provide the requested service in a fixed location
- execute a "software interrupt", which causes the kernel to jump to an "interrupt handler", which examines the information provided
- the kernel executes some fragment of kernel code that provides the requested service
- control is then returned to the program that requested the service.

(For more details, refer to e.g. https://www.cs.montana.edu/courses/spring2005/518/Hypertextbook/jim/index.html or any operating systems textbook.)

- Robert Tappan Morris, a graduate student at Cornell, created the "worm" in 1988 to see if it could be done
- ▶ It was a program intended to propagate slowly from host to host and measure the size of the Internet
- But due to coding errors on Morris's part, the worm created new copies as fast as it could, and infected machines became overloaded

Historical case: Morris worm

- ▶ Robert Tappan Morris, a graduate student at Cornell, created the "worm" in 1988 to see if it could be done
- It was a program intended to propagate slowly from host to host and measure the size of the Internet
- But due to coding errors on Morris's part, the worm created new copies as fast as it could, and infected machines became overloaded
- Morris was convicted under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, and sentenced to 3 years probation and 400 hours community service

Morris worm

The Morris worm used multiple vulnerabilities to copy itself from host to host – two are of interest to us.

- ► The worm exploited a bug in the sendmail program
- It exploited a buffer overflow in the fingerd network service

Morris worm – sendmail

- sendmail runs on a system and waits for other systems to connect to it and give it email for delivery
- It originated at a time when security was not a major consideration, and suffered from a number of security vulnerabilities
- At the time, most mail servers ran sendmail, and often allowed anyone to connect to it, from any other host (i.e. there was little in the way of authentication or integrity protection)
- Configuration of sendmail was (and is) extremely complex it's said many system administrators would rather write their own device driver than attempt to configure sendmail (ideally, our software should make it easy to do the right thing)

Morris worm – sendmail

- A feature which could be enabled in sendmail was a debug mode – a client program could connect to sendmail and issue the DEBUG command
- ► The client program would then provide an "email" message which, instead of email recipients, contained arbitrary commands to execute
 - the intention is to allow testers to use these commands to verify that email is being delivered correctly
- At the time, many vendors enabled this debug option by default (i.e. used an *unsafe default*)
- ► The worm executed commands to copy itself over to the machine running sendmail, run itself, and start infecting new machines

- ► A second avenue of attack was the finger service
- ► The finger service was once used to report information about a user on a host – full name, office location, phone extension, etc
 - ▶ It is rarely run these days its place is filled by services like LDAP (the Lightweight Directory Access Protocol) – UWA uses a version of this
- Like sendmail, the fingerd ("finger daemon") program runs in the background waiting for client programs to connect
- Like sendmail, fingerd typically allowed anyone to connect

Morris worm - fingerd

fingerd used a function called gets to read the incoming request.

If you type man gets, you will see the following

Never use this function.

Morris worm – gets

BUGS

Never use gets(). Because it is impossible to tell without knowing the data in advance how many characters gets() will read, and because gets() will continue to store characters past the end of the buffer, it is extremely dangerous to use. It has been used to break computer security. Use fgets() instead.

For more information, see CWE—242 (aka "Use of Inherently Dangerous Function") at http://cwe.mitre.org/data/definitions/242.html

And if you try to compile code containing gets, gcc will tell you

warning: the 'gets' function is dangerous and should not be used.

Morris worm – gets

Rusty Russell (an Australian Linux kernel contributor) proposed a rating scheme for APIs ranging from +10 ("It's impossible to get wrong") to -10("It's impossible to get right.").

- 10. It's impossible to get wrong.
 - 9. The compiler/linker won't let you get it wrong.
 - 8. The compiler will warn if you get it wrong.
- 7. The obvious use is (probably) the correct one.

- -7. The obvious use is wrong.
- -8. The compiler will warn if you get it right.
- -9. The compiler/linker won't let you get it right.
- -10. It's impossible to get right.

The gets function falls firmly into the "-10" level.

So what's the issue?

gets

The signature for gets is:

```
char *gets(char *s);
```

It reads a line of input from the standard input stream. The idea is that you pass it the address of a **buffer** (array) into which it should copy the line it read.

Here's an example of use:

```
#define BUFSIZE 512
// ...
char buf[BUFSIZE];
printf("Please enter your name and press <Enter>\n");
gets(buf);
```

```
#define BUFSIZE 512
// ...
char buf[BUFSIZE];
printf("Please enter your name and press <Enter>\n");
gets(buf);
```

The problem is that there is *no* way of telling gets how big the buffer buf is. If there are more than 512 characters on the line being read, gets doesn't stop – it just keeps copying characters into memory, past the end of buf.

As we saw when we discussed pointers, this is *undefined behaviour* – at this point, there are no guarantees about what the program will do.

```
#define BUFSIZE 512
// ...
char buf[BUFSIZE];
printf("Please enter your name and press <Enter>\n");
gets(buf);
```

So what will be sitting in memory after buf?

buf here is a local variable, sitting in the current stack frame. After it come other local variables, so those will get overwritten; and then the *return address*, the location in memory to go to once the current function has finished; and then the parameters passed to the current function.

```
#define BUFSIZE 512
// ...
char buf[BUFSIZE];
printf("Please enter your name and press <Enter>\n");
qets(buf);
```

If you're sending a message to the fingerd process, and you know the structure of its stack frame, you can deliberately overwrite the return address so that execution jumps to code of your choosing (known as "smashing the stack").

In fact, the data you send could include instructions for executing some arbitrary program (e.g. the shell), and you could force the program to jump to the instructions you just wrote.

buffer overflows

At least, that's how the stack could be exploited at the time the Morris worm was written.

On modern machines, there are several protections in place against this sort of attack:

- stack canaries
- address-space layout randomisation (ASLR)
- write XOR execute permissions
- source fortification

More on these next week!

References

▶ Karger, P. A., and R. R. Schell. "Thirty Years Later: Lessons from the Multics Security Evaluation." 18th Annual Computer Security Applications Conference, 2002. Proceedings., IEEE Comput. Soc, 2002, pp. 119–26, https://doi.org/10.1109/CSAC.2002.1176285.