

## Part 2: Return-to-libc Attack Lab

Copyright © 2006 - 2016 Wenliang Du, Syracuse University.  
Modifications by Tushar Jois for JHU 601.443/643, Security and Privacy in Computing.  
The development of this document was partially funded by the National Science Foundation under Award No. 1303306 and 1318814. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. A human-readable summary of (and not a substitute for) the license is the following: You are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. You must give appropriate credit. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

### 1 Lab Overview

The learning objective of this lab is for students to gain the first-hand experience on an interesting variant of buffer-overflow attack; this attack can bypass an existing protection scheme currently implemented in major Linux operating systems. A common way to exploit a buffer-overflow vulnerability is to overflow the buffer with a malicious shellcode, and then cause the vulnerable program to jump to the shellcode that is stored in the stack. To prevent these types of attacks, some operating systems allow programs to make their stacks non-executable; therefore, jumping to the shellcode will cause the program to fail.

Unfortunately, the above protection scheme is not fool-proof; there exists a variant of buffer-overflow attack called the *Return-to-libc* attack, which does not need an executable stack; it does not even use shellcode. Instead, it causes the vulnerable program to jump to some existing code, such as the `system()` function in the `libc` library, which is already loaded into a process's memory space.

In this lab, students are given a program with a buffer-overflow vulnerability; their task is to develop a Return-to-libc attack to exploit the vulnerability and finally to gain the root privilege. In addition to the attacks, students will be guided to walk through some protection schemes that have been implemented in Ubuntu to counter against the buffer-overflow attacks. This lab covers the following topics:

- Buffer overflow vulnerability and attack
- Stack layout in a function invocation
- Non-executable stack
- Address randomization
- The `libc` functions

**Readings and related topics.** Detailed coverage of the return-to-libc attack can be found in Chapter 5 of the SEED book, *Computer Security: A Hands-on Approach*, by Wenliang Du. A topic related to this lab is the general buffer-overflow attack, which is covered in a separate SEED lab, as well as in Chapter 4 of the SEED book.

**Lab environment.** This lab has been tested on our pre-built Ubuntu 16.04 VM, which can be downloaded from Blackboard.

### 2 Lab Tasks

#### 2.1 Turning Off Countermeasures

You can execute the lab tasks using our pre-built Ubuntu virtual machines. Ubuntu and other Linux distributions have implemented several security mechanisms to make the buffer-overflow attack difficult. To

simplify our attacks, we need to disable them first.

**Address Space Randomization.** Ubuntu and several other Linux-based systems uses address space randomization to randomize the starting address of heap and stack. This makes guessing the exact addresses difficult; guessing addresses is one of the critical steps of buffer-overflow attacks. In this lab, we disable this feature using the following command:

```
$ sudo sysctl -w kernel.randomize_va_space=0
```

**The StackGuard Protection Scheme.** The GCC compiler implements a security mechanism called *StackGuard* to prevent buffer overflows. In the presence of this protection, buffer overflow attacks will not work. We can disable this protection during the compilation using the *-fno-stack-protector* option. For example, to compile a program `example.c` with StackGuard disabled, we can do the following:

```
$ gcc -fno-stack-protector example.c
```

**Non-Executable Stack.** Ubuntu used to allow executable stacks, but this has now changed: the binary images of programs (and shared libraries) must declare whether they require executable stacks or not, i.e., they need to mark a field in the program header. Kernel or dynamic linker uses this marking to decide whether to make the stack of this running program executable or non-executable. This marking is done automatically by the recent versions of `gcc`, and by default, stacks are set to be non-executable. To change that, use the following option when compiling programs:

```
For executable stack:
$ gcc -z execstack -o test test.c

For non-executable stack:
$ gcc -z noexecstack -o test test.c
```

Because the objective of this lab is to show that the non-executable stack protection does not work, you should always compile your program using the `"-z noexecstack"` option in this lab.

**Configuring `/bin/sh`.** In the Ubuntu 16.04 VM, the `/bin/sh` symbolic link points to the `/bin/dash` shell. However, the `dash` program in these two VMs have an important difference. The `dash` shell in Ubuntu 16.04 has a countermeasure that prevents itself from being executed in a `Set-UID` process. Basically, if `dash` detects that it is executed in a `Set-UID` process, it immediately changes the effective user ID to the process's real user ID, essentially dropping the privilege.

Since our victim program is a `Set-UID` program, and our attack uses the `system()` function to run a command of our choice. This function does not run our command directly; it actually invokes `/bin/sh` to run our command. Therefore, the countermeasure in `/bin/dash` will immediately drop the `Set-UID` privilege before executing our command, making our attack more difficult. Therefore, we will link `/bin/sh` to another shell that does not have such a countermeasure. We have installed a shell program called `zsh` in our Ubuntu 16.04 VM. We use the following commands to link `/bin/sh` to `zsh`:

```
$ sudo rm /bin/sh
$ sudo ln -s /bin/zsh /bin/sh
```

It should be noted that the countermeasure implemented in `dash` can be easily circumvented with a little bit more effort. We use `zsh` just to make the task relatively easier to conduct.

## 2.2 The Vulnerable Program

```
/* retlib.c */

/* This program has a buffer overflow vulnerability. */
/* Our task is to exploit this vulnerability */
#include <stdlib.h>
#include <stdio.h>
#include <string.h>

int bof(FILE *badfile)
{
    char buffer[12];

    /* The following statement has a buffer overflow problem */
    fread(buffer, sizeof(char), 40, badfile);

    return 1;
}

int main(int argc, char **argv)
{
    FILE *badfile;

    badfile = fopen("badfile", "r");
    bof(badfile);

    printf("Returned Properly\n");

    fclose(badfile);
    return 1;
}
```

The above program has a buffer overflow vulnerability. It first reads an input of size 40 bytes from a file called `badfile` into a buffer of size 12. Since the function `fread()` does not check the buffer boundary, a buffer overflow will occur. This program is a root-owned Set-UID program, so if a normal user can exploit this buffer overflow vulnerability, the user might be able to get a root shell. It should be noted that the program gets its input from a file called `badfile`, which is provided by users. Therefore, we can construct the file in a way such that when the vulnerable program copies the file contents into its buffer, a root shell can be spawned.

Let us first compile the code and turn it into a root-owned Set-UID program. Do not forget to include the `-fno-stack-protector` option (for turning off the StackGuard protection) and the `"-z noexecstack"` option (for turning on the non-executable stack protection). It should also be noted that changing ownership must be done before turning on the Set-UID bit, because ownership change will cause the Set-UID bit to be turned off.

```
$ gcc -fno-stack-protector -z noexecstack -o retlib retlib.c
$ sudo chown root retlib
$ sudo chmod 4755 retlib
```

### 2.3 Task 1: Finding out the addresses of libc functions

In Return-to-libc attacks, we need to jump to some existing code that has already been loaded into the memory. We will use the `system()` and `exit()` functions in the `libc` library in our attack, so we need to know their addresses. There are many ways to do that, but using the GNU `gdb` debugger is probably the easiest method. Let us pick an arbitrary program `a.out` to debug:

```
$ gdb a.out
(gdb) b main           ①
(gdb) r               ②
(gdb) p system        ③
$1 = {<text variable, no debug info>} 0xb7c56da0 <__libc_system>
(gdb) p exit          ④
$2 = {<text variable, no debug info>} 0xb7c4a9d0 <__GI_exit>
```

In the above `gdb` commands, we first set a break point at the `main` function (Line ①); we then run the debugged program using command `r` (Line ②). The program will be stopped at the break point. We can now print out the address of the `system()` and `exit()` functions (Lines ③ and ④). From the outcome, we can see that the address for the `system()` function is `0xb7c56da0`, and the address for the `exit()` function is `0xb7c4a9d0`. The actual addresses in your VM might be different from these numbers.

### 2.4 Task 2: Putting the shell string in the memory

Our attack strategy is to jump to the `system()` function and get it to execute an arbitrary command. Since we would like to get a shell prompt, we want the `system()` function to execute the `"/bin/sh"` program. Therefore, the command string `"/bin/sh"` must be put in the memory first and we have to know its address (this address needs to be passed to the `system()` function). There are many ways to achieve these goals; we choose a method that use environment variables. Students are encouraged to use other approaches.

When we execute a program from a shell prompt, the shell actually spawns a child process to execute the program. All the exported shell variables will become the environment variable of the child process. This creates an easy way for us to put some arbitrary string in the child process's memory. Let us define a new shell variable `MYSHELL`, and let it contain the string `"/bin/sh"`. From the following commands, we can verify that the string gets into the child process, and it is printed out by the `env` command running inside the child process.

```
$ export MY_SHELL=/bin/sh
$ env | grep MY_SHELL
MY_SHELL=/bin/sh
```

We will use the address of this variable as an argument to `system()` call. The location of this variable in the memory can be found out easily using the following program:

```
void main(){
    char* shell = getenv("MY_SHELL");
    if (shell)
        printf("%x\n", (unsigned int)shell);
}
```

If the address randomization is turned off, you will find out that the same address is printed out. However, when you run the vulnerable program `retlib`, the address of the environment variable might not be exactly the same as the one that you get by running the above program; such an address can even change when you change the name of your program (the number of characters in the file name makes difference). The good

news is, the address of the shell will be quite close to what you print out using the above program. Therefore, you might need to try a few times to succeed.

## 2.5 Task 3: Exploiting the Buffer-Overflow Vulnerability

We are ready to create the content of `badfile`. Since the content involves some binary data (e.g., the address of the `libc` functions), we wrote a C program to do the construction. We provide you with a skeleton of the code, with the essential parts left for you to fill out.

```
/* exploit.c */

#include <stdlib.h>
#include <stdio.h>
#include <string.h>
int main(int argc, char **argv)
{
    char buf[40];
    FILE *badfile;

    badfile = fopen("./badfile", "w");

    /* You need to decide the addresses and
       the values for X, Y, Z. The order of the following
       three statements does not imply the order of X, Y, Z.
       Actually, we intentionally scrambled the order. */
    *(long *) &buf[X] = some address ;    // "/bin/sh"    ☆
    *(long *) &buf[Y] = some address ;    // system()    ☆
    *(long *) &buf[Z] = some address ;    // exit()      ☆

    fwrite(buf, sizeof(buf), 1, badfile);
    fclose(badfile);
}
```

You need to figure out the addresses in lines marked by ☆, as well as to find out where to store those addresses (i.e., the values for X, Y, and Z). If your values are incorrect, your attack might not work. In your report, you need to describe how you decide the values for X, Y and Z. Either show us your reasoning, or if you use a trial-and-error approach, show your trials.

After you finish the above program, compile and run it; this will generate the contents for `badfile`. Run the vulnerable program `retlib`. If your exploit is implemented correctly, when the function `bof()` returns, it will return to the `system()` function, and execute `system("/bin/sh")`. If the vulnerable program is running with the root privilege, you can get the root shell at this point.

```
$ gcc -o exploit exploit.c
$ ./exploit          // create the badfile
$ ./retlib          // launch the attack by running the vulnerable program
# <---- You've got a root shell!
```

**Attack variation 1:** Is the `exit()` function really necessary? Please try your attack without including the address of this function in `badfile`. Run your attack again, report and explain your observations.

**Attack variation 2:** After your attack is successful, change the file name of `retlib` to a different name, making sure that the length of the new file name is different. For example, you can change it to `newretlib`. Repeat the attack (without changing the content of `badfile`). Will your attack succeed or not? If it does not succeed, explain why.

## 2.6 Task 4: Turning on Address Randomization

In this task, let us turn on the Ubuntu's address randomization protection and see whether this protection is effective against the Return-to-libc attack. First, let us turn on the address randomization:

```
$ sudo sysctl -w kernel.randomize_va_space=2
```

Please run the same attack used in the previous task. Can you succeed? Please describe your observation and come up with your hypothesis. In the `exploit.c` program used in constructing `badfile`, we need to provide three addresses and the values for X, Y, and Z. Which of these six values will be incorrect if the address randomization is turned on. Please provide evidences in your report.

If you plan to use `gdb` to conduct your investigation, you should be aware that `gdb` by default disables the address space randomization for the debugged process, regardless of whether the address randomization is turned on in the underlying operating system or not. Inside the `gdb` debugger, you can run `"show disable-randomization"` to see whether the randomization is turned off or not. You can use `"set disable-randomization on"` and `"set disable-randomization off"` to change the setting.

## 3 Guidelines: Understanding the function call mechanism

### 3.1 Understanding the Stack Layout

To know how to conduct the Return-to-libc attack, it is essential to understand how the stack works. We use a small C program to understand the effects of a function invocation on the stack. More detailed explanation can be found in the SEED book, *Computer Security: A Hands-on Approach*, by Wenliang Du.

```
/* foobar.c */
#include<stdio.h>
void foo(int x)
{
    printf("Hello world: %d\n", x);
}

int main()
{
    foo(1);
    return 0;
}
```

We can use `"gcc -S foobar.c"` to compile this program to the assembly code. The resulting file `foobar.s` will look like the following:

```
.....
8 foo:
9     pushl   %ebp
10    movl   %esp, %ebp
```

```
11     subl    $8, %esp
12     movl    8(%ebp), %eax
13     movl    %eax, 4(%esp)
14     movl    $.LC0, (%esp) : string "Hello world: %d\n"
15     call    printf
16     leave
17     ret
.....
21 main:
22     leal    4(%esp), %ecx
23     andl    $-16, %esp
24     pushl   -4(%ecx)
25     pushl   %ebp
26     movl    %esp, %ebp
27     pushl   %ecx
28     subl    $4, %esp
29     movl    $1, (%esp)
30     call    foo
31     movl    $0, %eax
32     addl    $4, %esp
33     popl    %ecx
34     popl    %ebp
35     leal   -4(%ecx), %esp
36     ret
```

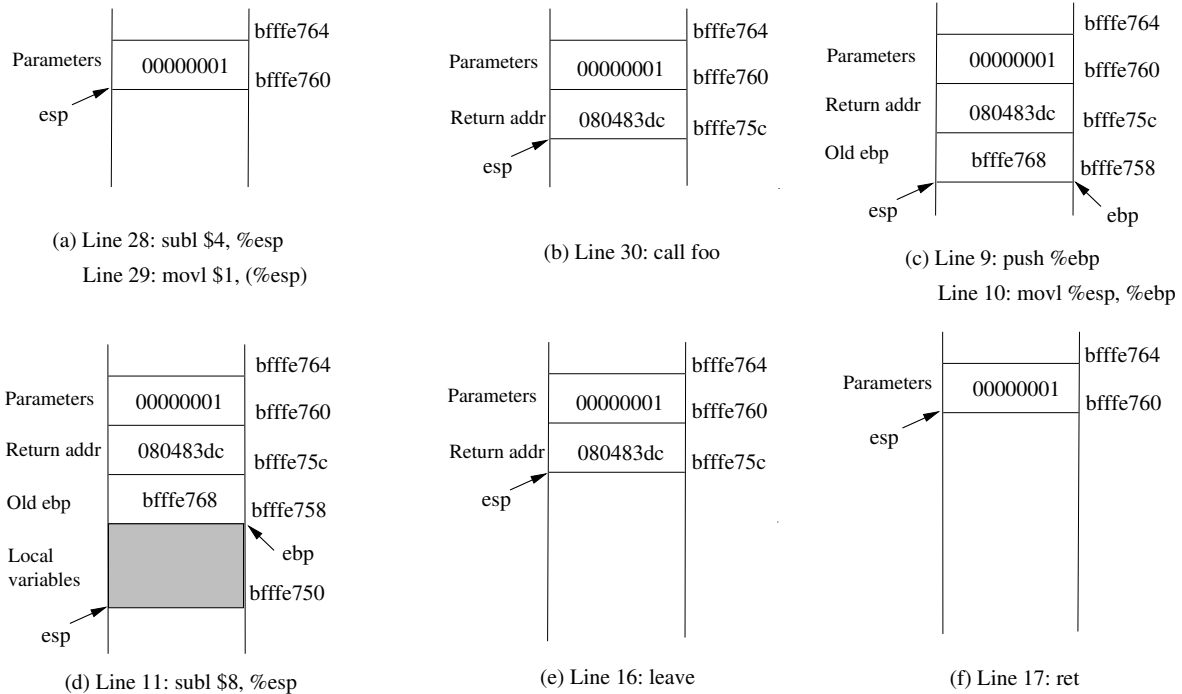
### 3.2 Calling and Entering `foo()`

Let us concentrate on the stack while calling `foo()`. We can ignore the stack before that. Please note that line numbers instead of instruction addresses are used in this explanation.

- **Line 28-29:** These two statements push the value 1, i.e. the argument to the `foo()`, into the stack. This operation increments `%esp` by four. The stack after these two statements is depicted in Figure 1(a).
- **Line 30: `call foo`:** The statement pushes the address of the next instruction that immediately follows the `call` statement into the stack (i.e the return address), and then jumps to the code of `foo()`. The current stack is depicted in Figure 1(b).
- **Line 9-10:** The first line of the function `foo()` pushes `%ebp` into the stack, to save the previous frame pointer. The second line lets `%ebp` point to the current frame. The current stack is depicted in Figure 1(c).
- **Line 11: `subl $8, %esp`:** The stack pointer is modified to allocate space (8 bytes) for local variables and the two arguments passed to `printf`. Since there is no local variable in function `foo`, the 8 bytes are for arguments only. See Figure 1(d).

### 3.3 Leaving `foo()`

Now the control has passed to the function `foo()`. Let us see what happens to the stack when the function returns.

Figure 1: Entering and Leaving `foo()`

- **Line 16: `leave`:** This instruction implicitly performs two instructions (it was a macro in earlier x86 releases, but was made into an instruction later):

```
mov %ebp, %esp
pop %ebp
```

The first statement release the stack space allocated for the function; the second statement recover the previous frame pointer. The current stack is depicted in Figure 1(e).

- **Line 17: `ret`:** This instruction simply pops the return address out of the stack, and then jump to the return address. The current stack is depicted in Figure 1(f).
- **Line 32: `addl $4, %esp`:** Further restore the stack by releasing more memories allocated for `foo`. As you can clearly see that the stack is now in exactly the same state as it was before entering the function `foo` (i.e., before line 28).

## 4 Submission

You need to submit a detailed lab report, with screenshots, to describe what you have done and what you have observed. You also need to provide explanation to the observations that are interesting or surprising. Please also list the important code snippets followed by explanation. Simply attaching code without any explanation will not receive credit.

Writing in clear, concise English is a part of the exercise (and the grade). Make sure you describe, step-by-step, your process. We want to be able to recreate your results by following your steps exactly. Logical leaps between steps will result in point deductions. Do not be afraid to include issues you faced, and how



you solved them. Note that you must answer all questions in paragraph form for full credit. Look at the example report on Blackboard for an idea of what we are expecting.

When you are ready to submit your lab report, upload it to Gradescope as a single PDF including all parts. DOCX and other formats will not be accepted. Make sure you select your partner on Gradescope if applicable: only one submission between the two of you is necessary.