# Buffer Overflow

Security 1 (CM0475, CM0493) 2019-20
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## Introduction

**Buffer overflow** is one of the **most common vulnerabilities**

- caused by “**careless**” programming
- known **since 1988** but still present

# Introduction

Why still there ...

Can be avoided, in principle, by writing ***secure code***

- non-trivial in “**unsafe**” languages, e.g., C
- **legacy** application/systems might have overflows

⇒ **mitigation** mechanisms are important!

# Brief history of some famous overflows

**1988** The **Morris Internet Worm** used a buffer overflow exploit in **`fingerd`**

**1995** A buffer overflow in **httpd 1.3** was discovered and published on the Bugtraq mailing list

**1996** "*Smashing the Stack for Fun and Profit*" in Phrack magazine (a step by step **introduction**)

**2001** Code Red worm exploited a buffer overflow in **Microsoft IIS 5.0**

**2003** Slammer worm exploited a buffer overflow in **Microsoft SQL Server 2000**

**2004** Sasser worm exploited an overflow in Microsoft Windows 2000/XP, **Local Security Authority Subsystem Service** (LSASS).

## Definition

A buffer **overflow** (**overrun** or **overwrite**), is defined as follows [NISTIR 7298]:

> A condition at an interface under which **more input** can be placed into a buffer or data holding area **than the capacity allocated**, **overwriting** other information.
>
> Attackers **exploit** such a condition to
>
> - **crash** a system
> - insert specially crafted **data** that break integrity
> - insert specially crafted **code** to gain control of the system

## Consequences

**Example**: a program storing data **beyond the limits** of a fixed-sized buffer

Buffer can be located

- on the **stack**
- in the **heap**
- in the **data section**

Effects:

- modify other variables (**corruption of data**)
- modify the program control flow data such as return addresses and pointers to previous stack frames (**corruption of control**)

⇒ arbitrary **code execution** with the **privileges** of the attacked process

# Safe vs. unsafe languages (1)

**Assembly** is fast but does not provide any notion of type

- 👍 **full access** to resources
- 👍 high **performance**
- 👎 data can be **interpreted** and used in any way
- 👎 programmer's **responsibility** to enforce safe execution

Languages such as **Java**, **ADA**, **Python** are safer

- 👍 strong notion of **types**
- 👍 overflows are **not possible**
- 👎 usually limited/missing **direct access** to resources
- 👎 compile-time and run-time **overhead**

# Safe vs. unsafe languages (2)

C is <u>in between</u>!

Like Assembly:

👍 **full access** to resources

👍 high **performance**

⇒ used to develop Unix. Still the preferred language for **low-level programming** (OS, device drivers, firmware, ...)

Differently from ADA, Java, Python, C has **weak types**

👎 low-level, **unsafe access** to data is possible

👎 programmer's **responsibility** to enforce safe execution in many cases (e.g. overflows are possible)

👎 many **unsafe library functions**

## Example: simple overflow

```
#include<stdio.h>
#include<string.h>

void checkpassword() {
      int valid = 0;
      char str1[8]; // 7 chars + NULL
      char str2[8]; // 7 chars + NULL
      strcpy(str1,"pwd1234"); // a secret pwd
      printf("Insert password: ");
      fflush(stdout);
      gets(str2); // reads the user password
      // compares 8 chars of str1 and str2
      if (strncmp(str1, str2, 8) == 0)
            valid = 1; // password is valid
      printf("buffer1: str1(%s), str2(%s),
            valid(%d)\n", str1, str2, valid);
}

int main(int argc, char *argv[]) {
      checkpassword();
}
```

`str1` and `str2` are two buffers of 8 bytes (1 byte for NULL termination)

`str1` contains, at run-time, the secret password `"pwd1234"`

`str2` is used to read user input

first 8 bytes of `str1` and `str2` are compared and if equal valid is set to `1` (true)

# Example: simple overflow

```
# ./overflow
Insert password: AAAAAAA
buffer1: str1(pwd1234), str2(AAAAAAA), valid(0)
```

Password is wrong

```
# ./overflow
Insert password: pwd1234
buffer1: str1(pwd1234), str2(pwd1234), valid(1)
```

Password is correct

```
# ./overflow
Insert password: AAAAAAAA
buffer1: str1(), str2(AAAAAAAA), valid(0)
```

`(8 chars)`
`0x00 (NULL)` overflows first byte of `str1`

```
# ./overflow
Insert password: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
buffer1: str1(AAAAAAA), str2(AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA), valid(0)
```

`(15 chars)`
`7 A's and 0x00` overflows `str1`

```
# ./overflow
Insert password: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
buffer1: str1(AAAAAAAA), str2(AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA), valid(1)
```

`(16 chars)`
Password is correct! `strncmp(str1,str2,8)`

## Unsafe C functions

```
# gcc overflow.c -o overflow
overflow.c: In function 'checkpassword':
overflow.c:17:2: warning: implicit declaration of function 'gets'; did you mean 'getw'?
[-Wimplicit-function-declaration]
  gets(str1); // reads the user password
  ^~~~
  getw
```

Function `gets` is **unsafe** and **should never be used** (cannot limit user input!)

**Note 1**: `gets` has been removed from stdio.h, so compiling gives a warning but program works anyway (**legacy** code needs to be supported)

**Note 2**: `strcpy` is unsafe too, but it is still in stdio.h (no warning). In this case, since `"pwd1234"` fits the 8 bytes we do not get any security warning.

# Stack overflow

A buffer overflow **occurring on the stack,** also known as ***stack smashing***

Right after the local variables, the stack contains

- The old **frame pointer**
- The **return address**

A stack overflow can overwrite these control data to run **arbitrary code**

# Function call

**Calling function**:

1. push **parameters**
2. call (pushes the **return address**)

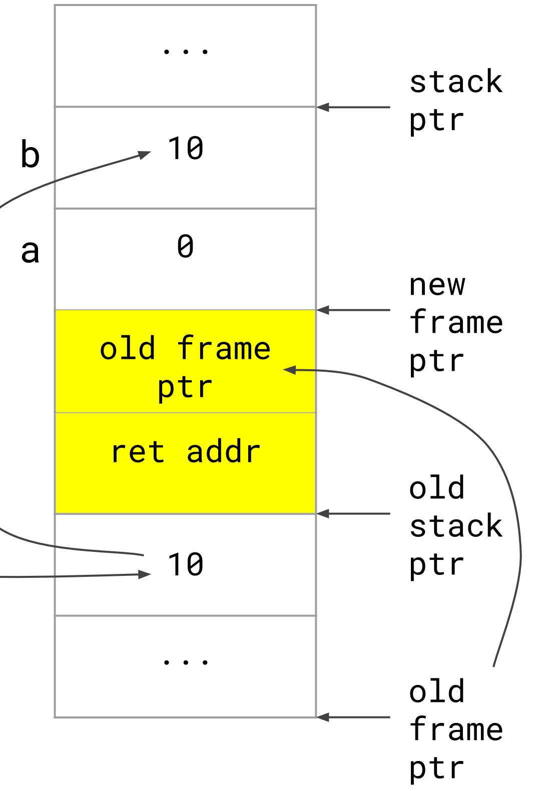
**Called function**:

3. push **old frame pointer**
4. **new frame pointer** is set where the stack pointer is
5. **stack pointer** is decreased so to allocate <u>local variables</u>
6. **parameters** are accessed

```
int f (int x) {
    int a = 0;
    int b = x;
    …
}
```

Invocation:

```
    f(10);
```



# Function return

When f returns, it

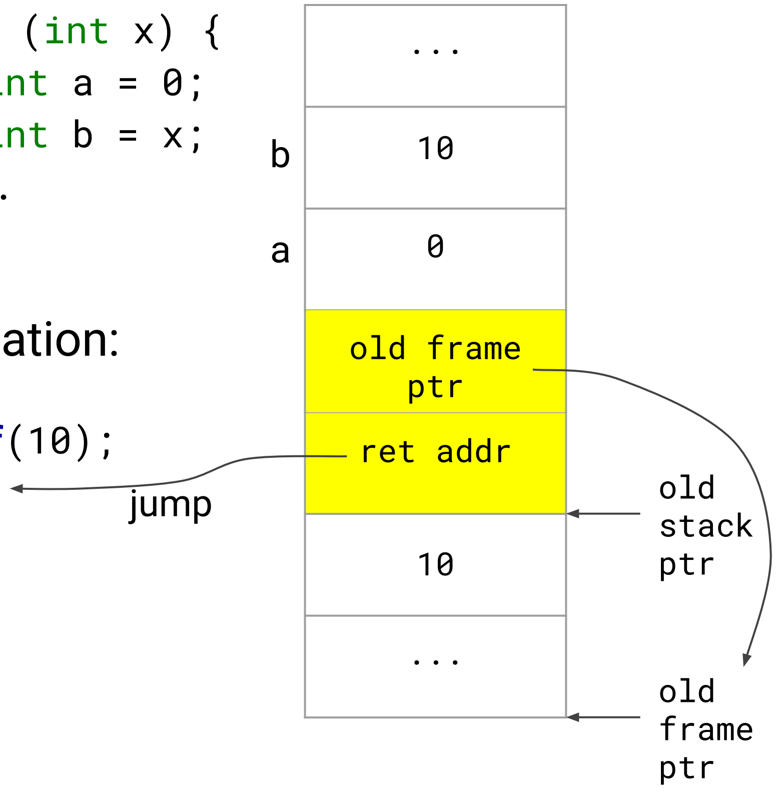
1. sets the **stack pointer** to the old frame pointer position
2. pops and **restores** the **old frame pointer**
3. return (pops and **jumps** to the **return address**)

⇒ If an overflow overwrites the return address, the **control** goes to the new address (possibly malicious)

```
int f (int x) {
    int a = 0;
    int b = x;
    …
}
```

Invocation:

```
    f(10);
```



## Example: stack overflow

```
#include<stdio.h>
#include<string.h>

void hiddenfunction() {
      printf("This will never be reached!\n");
}

void checkpassword() {
      ...
      // same code as before with overflow
      ...
}

int main(int argc, char *argv[]) {
      checkpassword();
}
```

Suppose our previous example program contains a function that is **not even invoked** (`hiddenfunction`)

Assume that `hiddenfunction` is **located** at `0x0000555555551da`

(because of **little-endianness** we will need to pass the address in reverse order as bytes `0xda 0x51 0x55 0x55 0x55 0x55 0x00 0x00`)

# Example: stack overflow

```
# ./overflow
Insert password: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA                                      (19 chars)
buffer1: str1(AAAAAAAA), str2(AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA), valid(1)                 str2 is 16 chars! valid is overwriting it

# ./overflow
Insert password: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA                                     (20 chars)
buffer1: str1(AAAAAAAA), str2(AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA), valid(1)
Segmentation fault                                                        Segfault!

# echo -e 'AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA\xda\x51\x55\x55\x55\x55\x00\x00' | ./stack
Insert password: buffer1: str1(AAAAAAAA), str2(AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA), valid(1)
Segmentation fault                                                        Old frame pointer but not return address!

# echo -e 'AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA\xda\x51\x55\x55\x55\x55\x00\x00' | ./stack
Insert password: buffer1: str1(AAAAAAAA), str2(AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA), valid(1)
This will never be reached!
Segmentation fault                                                        Old frame pointer and return address!
```

## More C unsafe functions

```
sprintf(char *str,char *format,...)
```

create `str` according to supplied `format` and variables `...`

```
vsprintf(char *str, char *format,
         va_list vars)
```

create `str` according to supplied `format` and variables `vars`

```
strcat(char *dest, char *src)
```

append contents of string `src` to string `dest`

```
strcpy(char *dest, char *src)
```

copy contents of string `src` to `dest`

## … and their “safe” counterpart

```
snprintf(char *str, size_t size,
         char *format,...)
```

same as `sprintf` but writes at most `size` chars (including `0x00`)

```
vsnprintf(char *str, size_t size,
          char *format, va_list vars)
```

same as `vsprintf` but writes at most `size` chars (including `0x00`)

```
strncat(char *dest, char *src,
        size_t size)
```

same as `strcat` but appends at most `size` chars (excluding `0x00`)

`dest` size at least: `strlen(dest)+n+1`

```
strncpy(char *dest, char *src,
        size_t size)
```

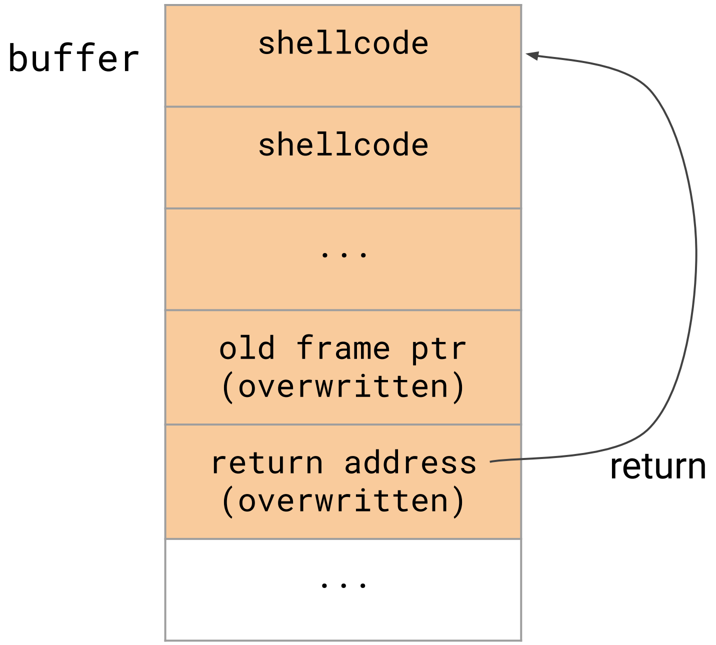
same as above but it does not add `0x00` if `src` is cut to n!

# Shellcodes

**Definition**: small binary program that executes a **shell** (or arbitrary code)

- **small** so to fit the buffer
- **position independent**
- **null byte** (0x00) free (in case overflow is over string operations)
- **library** independent

⇒ inject on the stack and **return to it**



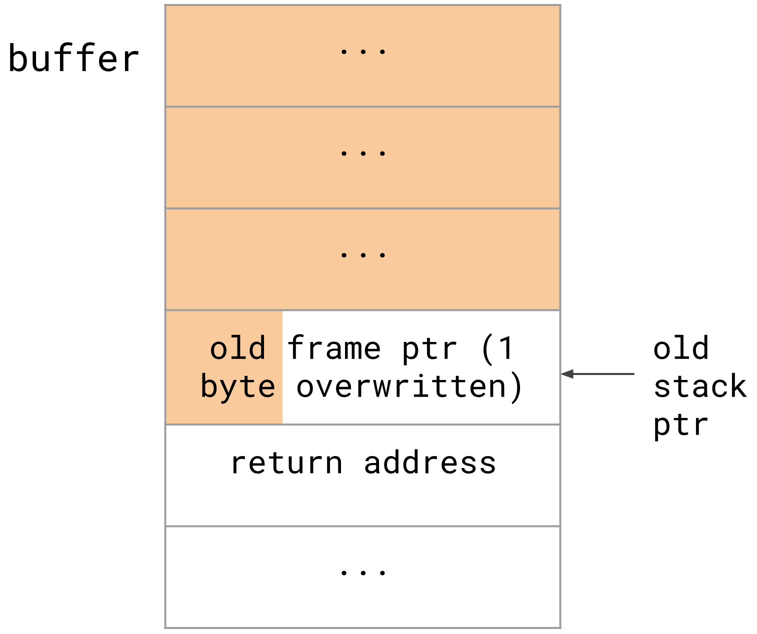
# Replacement stack frame

**off-by-one**: a subtle overflow of a single byte (<= instead of <)

- **too short** to overwrite return address

**IDEA**: overwrite **a single byte** of old frame pointer

- stack frame is moved to an area controlled by the attacker so that **next** return address is malicious

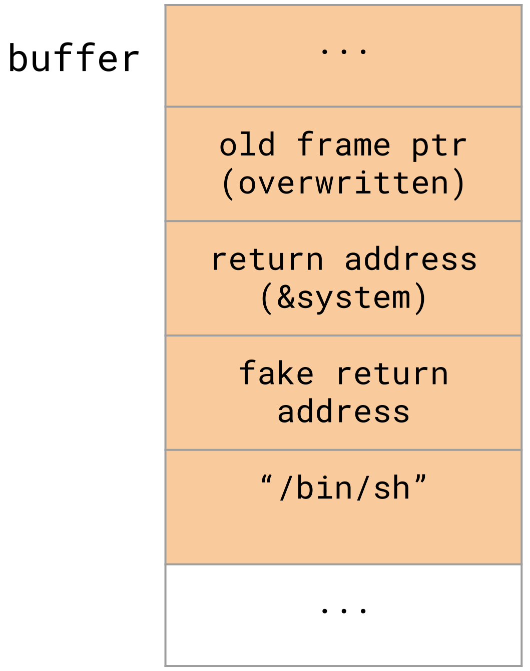


# Return to syscall / libc

**Idea**: return to existing syscalls or library functions

- overwrite a “reasonable” old frame pointer
- write function address over **return address**
- write a **fake return address**
- write function **parameters**

⇒ function will read **parameters** from the stack and **execute** (cf. function call slide)



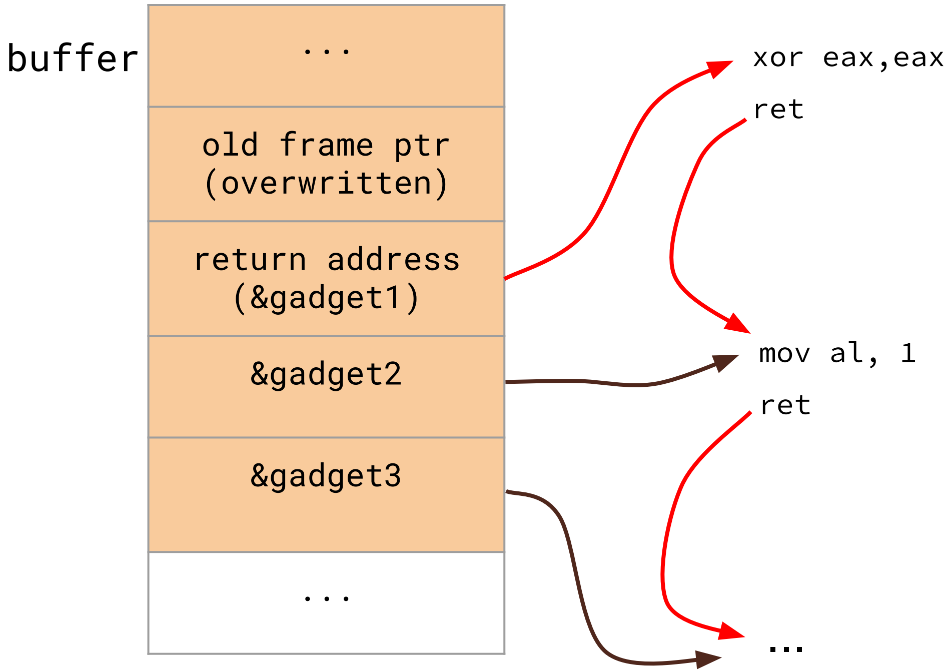
“invokes” system(“/bin/sh”)

# Return Oriented Programming (ROP)

**Idea**: return to fragment of codes close to return commands (***gadgets***)

- overwrite return address with a **sequence** of gadget addresses
- when function returns it will **activate** the first gadget that will activate the second, and so on...

⇒ malicious code as the **composition of gadgets** (e.g., starting a shell)



# Defences

**Compile-time**: **harden** programs to resist to overflow attacks (important for new programs)

**Run-time**: **detect** and **block** attacks on existing programs

# Compile-time defences

**Use safe programming languages**: use **unsafe** languages only if **strictly necessary** (access to hardware, extreme performance). **Low-level libraries** might be vulnerable though

**Safe coding techniques**: always check buffer boundaries, use safe library functions; ***graceful failure*** when unexpected occurs. (more detail in next class)

**Stack protection**: Compiler

- **adds extra code** to look for stack corruption. StackGuard uses a random ***canary*** value that is pushed after old frame pointer and **checked** before return

- **rearranges** variable position so that buffers are the **last ones** on the stack (mitigates overflows)

# Canary (1)

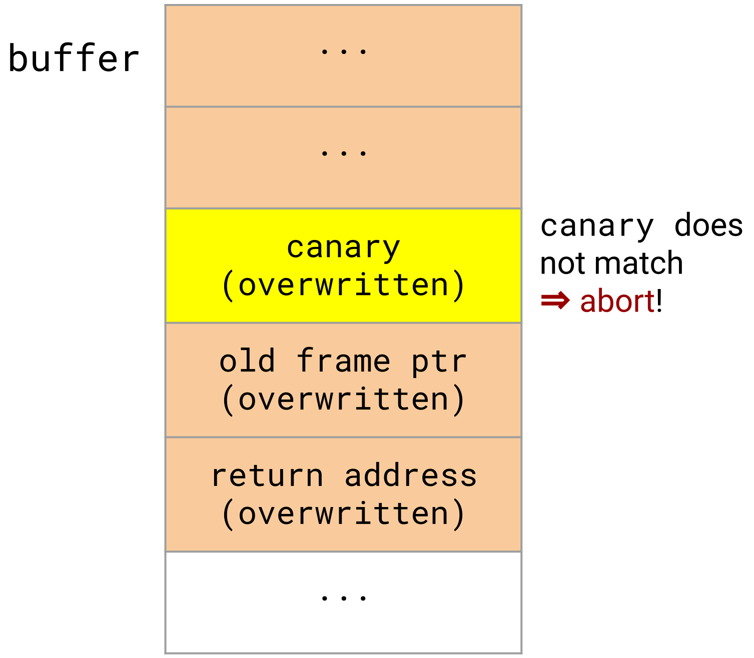
Requires operating system support

When function **starts**:

- random canary is **copied** to the stack from the process table

Before function **returns**:

- original canary is **compared** with the one of the stack and, if different, the function **aborts**



# Canary (2)

```
# Read random canary from the process
mov     rax,QWORD PTR fs:0x28

# Copy canary on the stack
mov     QWORD PTR [rbp-0x8],rax

(function code)

# Reads canary  from the stack
mov     rax,QWORD PTR [rbp-0x8]

# Compares with process canary
xor     rax,QWORD PTR fs:0x28

# If OK go to return else fail
je      0x12b1 <checkpassword+180>
call    0x1060 <__stack_chk_fail@plt>
```

👍 **very effective** prevention of overflows but requires re-compiling programs

👎 void if canary is **leaked** (for example due to another vulnerability)

👎 void in case of **random access** to the stack (eg. overflowing a buffer index)

# Run-time defences

**Executable address space protection**: prevent **execution** of code in particular segments (e.g. stack, heap, …). Requires **hardware** support.

👍 prevents **shellcodes**

👎 does not prevent return to **syscall, libc, ROP**

👎 some programs need to **disable** it (they execute code on the stack)

**Address space randomization**: randomize address space in order to make it harder to discover addresses

👍 make **overflow attacks** much harder (what return address??)

👎 bypassed if attacker can **brute-force**

👎 bypassed if addresses are **leaked** (e.g. recent side-channels attacks)