ECS 235B Module 47
Side Channels
Side Channels

A side channel is set of characteristics of a system, from which adversary can deduce confidential information about system or a competition

• Consider information to be derived as HIGH
• Consider information obtained from set of characteristics as LOW
• Attack is to deduce HIGH values from LOW values only
• Implication: attack works on systems not deducibly secure
Types of Side Channel Attacks

• **Passive**: Only observe system; deduce results from observations
• **Active**: Disrupt system in some way, causing it to react; deduce results from measurements of disruption
Example: Passive Attack

• Fast modular exponentiation:
  
  $x := 1; \text{atmp} := a;$
  
  for $i := 0 \text{ to } k-1$ do begin
    if $z_i = 1$ then
      $x := (x \ast \text{atmp}) \mod n;$
      $\text{atmp} := (\text{atmp} \ast \text{atmp}) \mod n;$
    end;

  result := $x;$

• If bit is 1, there are 2 multiplications; if it is 0, only one

• Extra multiplication takes time

• Can determine bits of the confidential exponent by measuring computation time
Example: Active Attack

Background

• Derive information from characteristics of memory accesses in chip

• Intel x86 caches
  • Each core has 2 levels, L1 and L2
  • Chip itself has third cache (L3 or LLC)
  • These are hierarchical: miss in L1 goes to L2, miss in L2 goes to L3, miss in L3 goes to memory
  • Caches are inclusive (so L3 has copies of data in L2 and L1)

• Processes share pages
Example: Active Attack

Phase 1
• Flush a set of bytes (called a *line*) from cache to clear it from all 3 caches
  • The disruption

Phase 2
• Wait until victim has chance to access that memory line

Phase 3
• Reload the line
  • If victim did this already, time is short as data comes from L3 cache
  • Otherwise time is longer as memory fetch is required
Example: Active Attack

What happened

• Used to trace execution of GnuPG on a physical machine
• Derived bits of a 2048 bit private key; max of 190 bits incorrect
• Repeated experiment on virtual machine
• Error rates increased
  • On one system, average error rate increased from 1.41 bits to 26.55 bits
  • On another system, average error rate increased from 25.12 bits to 66.12 bits
Model

Components

- **Primitive**: instantiation of computation
- **Device**: system doing the computation
- **Physical observable**: output being observed
- **Leakage function**: captures characteristics of side channel and mechanism to monitor the physical observables
- **Implementation function**: instantiation of both device, leakage function
- **Side channel adversary**: algorithm that queries implementation to get outputs from leakage function
Example

• First one (passive attack) divided leakage function into two parts
  • *Signal* was variations in output due to bit being derived
  • *Noise* was variations due to other factors (imprecisions in measurements, etc.)

• Second one (active attack) had leakage function acting in different ways
  • Physical machine: one chip used more advanced optimizations, thus more noise
  • Virtual machine: more variations due to extra computations running the virtual machines, hence more noise
Example: Electromagnetic Radiation

• CRT video display produces radiation that can be measured

• Using various equipment and a black and white TV, van Eck could reconstruct the images
  • Reconstructed pictures on video display units in buildings

• E-voting system with audio activated (as it would be for visually impaired voters) produced interference with sound from a nearby transistor radio
  • Testers believed changes in the sound due to the interference could be used to determine how voter was voting
Quiz

Choose the correct one:

Side channel attacks are really a form of violating (integrity, non-deducibility)