

Lecture 23

November 17, 2025

ECS 235A, Computer and Information Security

Administratrivia

- All submitted homework 2s have been graded
- Any homework 2 turned in by noon Monday will lose 50% of the grade

Any homework 2 not turned in by noon Tuesday will not be accepted

Economic Motives

- Used to target ads that use is most likely to respond to
- Purveyors get money for every ad displayed or clicked on
 - Web site owners display ads on their sites
 - Developers put adware libraries in their apps
 - Others take apps, modify them to include adware, and put them on unauthorized app stores

Spyware

- Trojan horse that records information about the use of a computer for a third party
 - Usually results in compromise of confidential information like keystrokes, passwords, credit card numbers, etc.
 - Information can be stored for retrieval or sent to third party
- Put on a system the way any other malware gets onto system

Example: Pegasus

- Designed for Apple's iPhone, attacker sends URL to victim who clicks on it, triggering attack that tries to gain control of iPhone
- First sends HTML file exploiting vulnerability in WebKit
 - Basis for Safari and other browsers
- This downloads software to gain control of iPhone
 - Software enciphered with different keys for each download
 - Includes a loader for the next stage
- Loader downloads dynamic load libraries, daemons, other software and installs Pegasus
 - If iPhone has previously been jailbroken, removes all access to the iPhone provided by the earlier break

Example: Response to Pegasus

- Apple developed patches for the vulnerabilities exploited
 - Deployed them in update to iPhone's operating system, iOS
- Discovered when human rights activist received text messages with a suspicious link
 - Sent messages to Citizens Lab
 - Citizens Lab recognized links were associated with a manufacturer of spyware for government surveillance
 - Lookout carried out technical analysis

Ransomware

- Malware inhibiting use of computer, resources until a ransom is paid
 - Ransom is usually monetary, and must be paid through some anonymous mechanism (BitCoin is popular)
- PC CYBORG (1989) altered AUTOEXEC.BAT to count number of times system was booted; on 90th, names of all files on main drive (C:) enciphered and directories hidden
 - User told to send fee to post office box to recover the system
- CryptoLocker (2013) encrypted files and gave victim 100 hours to pay ransom; if not, encryption keys destroyed
 - Used evasive techniques to make tracking more difficult
 - Spread via email as attachments

Example Protocol

Goal: Angie wants to extort money from Xavier

- Angie generates asymmetric key pair; embeds public key in malware
 - She retains private key
- Malware infects Xavier's system
 - Generates symmetric key and uses that to encipher target data
 - Enciphers symmetric key with public key, erases all instances of symmetric key
 - Xavier sees message saying he needs to do something for Angie (usually send money); he does so and includes the encrypted symmetric key
- Angie then deciphers encrypted symmetric key with her private key, returns it to Xavier

Phishing

- Act of impersonating legitimate entity in order to obtain information such as passwords or credit card information without authorization
 - Usually a web site associated with a business
- Usual approach: craft a web site that looks like the legitimate one
 - Send out lots of email trying to persuade people to go to that web site
 - Copy their login, password, and other information for later use
- More vicious attack: fake web site passes data on to real web site, and sends replies back to victim
 - Man-in-the-middle attack

Example

- Heidi banks at MegaBank, with URL of <https://www.megabank.com>
- She receives a letter saying she needs to check her account for possible fraudulent activity
- Email includes link
 - Link is visible as www.megabank.com
 - But link actually connects to <https://www.megabank.crookery.com>
- Attacker records name, password, then give error
 - If very clever, client is redirected to actual bank's home page

Spearphishing

- Phishing attack tailored for particular user
- Used to attack specific (types of) users to obtain information
- Example: some employees of a major cybersecurity company received email called “2011 Recruitment Plan”
 - They opened an attacked spreadsheet
 - This exploited a vulnerability in a supporting program to install a backdoor so attackers could control system remotely
 - Attackers used this as a springboard to compromise other systems in the company’s network, and ultimately stole sensitive information
 - Embarrassment, financial costs of recovery large

Defenses

- Scanning
- Distinguishing between data, instructions
- Containing
- Specifying behavior
- Limiting sharing
- Statistical analysis

Scanning Defenses

- Malware alters memory contents or disk files
- Compute manipulation detection code (MDC) to generate signature block for data, and save it
- Later, recompute MDC and compare to stored MDC
 - If different, data has changed

Example: *tripwire*

- File system scanner
- Initialization: it computes signature block for each file, saves it
 - Signature consists of file attributes, cryptographic checksums
 - System administrator selects what file attributes go into signature
- Checking file system: run *tripwire*
 - Regenerates file signatures
 - Compares them to stored file signatures and reports any differences

Assumptions

- Files do not contain malicious logic when original signature block generated
- Pozzo & Grey: implement Biba's model on LOCUS to make assumption explicit
 - Credibility ratings assign trustworthiness numbers from 0 (untrusted) to n (signed, fully trusted)
 - Subjects have risk levels
 - Subjects can execute programs with credibility ratings $\geq$ risk level
 - If credibility rating $<$ risk level, must use special command to run program

Antivirus Programs

- Look for specific “malware signatures”
 - If found, warn user and/or disinfect data
- At first, static sequences of bits, or patterns; now also includes patterns of behavior
- At first, derived manually; now usually done automatically
 - Manual derivation impractical due to number of malwares

Example: Earlybird

- System for generating worm signatures based on worm increasing network traffic between hosts, and this traffic has many common substrings
- When a packet arrives, its contents hashed and destination port and protocol identifier appended; then check hash table (called *dispersion table*) to see if this content, port, and protocol have been seen
 - If yes, increment counters for source, destination addresses; if both exceed a threshold, content may be worm signature
 - If no, run through a multistage filter that applies 4 different hashes and checks for those hashes in different tables; count of entry with smallest count incremented; if all 4 counters exceed a second threshold, make entry in dispersion table
- Found several worms before antimalware vendors distributed signatures for them

Example: Polygraph

- Assumes worm is polymorphic or metamorphic
- Generates classes of signatures, all based on substrings called *tokens*
 - *Conjunction signature*: collection of tokens, matched if all tokens appear regardless of order
 - *Token-subsequence signature*: like conjunction signature but tokens must appear in order
- Bayes signature associates a score with each token, and threshold with signature
 - If probability of the payload as computed from token scores exceeds a threshold, match occurs
- Experimentally, Bayes signatures work well when there is little non-malicious traffic, but if that's more than 80% of network traffic, no worms identified

Behavioral Analysis

- Run suspected malware in a confined area, typically a sandbox, that simulates environment it will execute in
- Monitor it for some time period
- Look for anything considered “bad”; if it occurs, flag this as malware

Example: Panorama

- Loads suspected malware into a Windows system, which is itself loaded into Panorama and run
 - Files belonging to suspect program are marked
- Test engine sends “sensitive” information to trusted application on Windows
- Taint engine monitors flow of information around system
 - So when suspect program and trusted application run, behavior of information can be recorded in taint graphs
- Malware detection engine analyzes taint graphs for suspicious behavior
- Experimentally, Panorama tested against 42 malware samples, 56 benign samples; no false negatives, 3 false positives

Evasion

Malware can try to ensure malicious activity not triggered in analysis environment

- Wait for a (relatively) long time
- Wait for a particular input or external event
- Identify malware is running in constrained environment
 - Check various descriptor tables
 - Run sequence of instructions that generate an exception if not in a virtual machine (in 2010, estimates found 2.13% of malware samples did this)

Data vs. Instructions

- Malicious logic is both
 - Virus: written to program (data); then executes (instructions)
- Approach: treat “data” and “instructions” as separate types, and require certifying authority to approve conversion
 - Key are assumption that certifying authority will *not* make mistakes and assumption that tools, supporting infrastructure used in certifying process are not corrupt

Example: Duff and UNIX

- Observation: users with execute permission usually have read permission, too
 - So files with “execute” permission have type “executable”; those without it, type “data”
 - Executable files can be altered, but type immediately changed to “data”
 - Implemented by turning off execute permission
 - Certifier can change them back
 - So virus can spread only if run as certifier

Containment

- Basis: a user (unknowingly) executes malicious logic, which then executes with all that user's privileges
 - Limiting accessibility of objects should limit spread of malicious logic and effects of its actions
- Approach draws on mechanisms for confinement

Information Flow Metrics

- Idea: limit distance a virus can spread
- Flow distance metric $fd(x)$:
 - Initially, all information x has $fd(x) = 0$
 - Whenever information y is shared, $fd(y)$ increases by 1
 - Whenever $y_1, \dots, y_n$ used as input to compute z , $fd(z) = \max(fd(y_1), \dots, fd(y_n))$
- Information x accessible if and only if for some parameter V , $fd(x) < V$

Example

- Anne: $V_A = 3$; Bill, Cathy: $V_B = V_C = 2$
- Anne creates program P containing virus
- Bill executes P
 - P tries to write to Bill's program Q; works, as $fd(P) = 0$, so $fd(Q) = 1 < V_B$
- Cathy executes Q
 - Q tries to write to Cathy's program R; fails, as $fd(Q) = 1$, so $fd(R)$ would be 2
- Problem: if Cathy executes P, R can be infected
 - So, does not stop spread; slows it down greatly, though

Implementation Issues

- Metric associated with *information*, not *objects*
 - You can tag files with metric, but how do you tag the information in them?
 - This inhibits sharing
- To stop spread, make $V = 0$
 - Disallows sharing
 - Also defeats purpose of multi-user systems, and is crippling in scientific and developmental environments
 - Sharing is critical here

Reducing Protection Domain

- Application of principle of least privilege
- Basic idea: remove rights from process so it can only perform its function
 - Warning: if that function requires it to write, it can write anything
 - But you can make sure it writes only to those objects you expect

Example: ACLs and C-Lists

- s_1 owns file f_1 and s_2 owns program p_2 and file f_3
 - Suppose s_1 can read, write f_1 , execute p_2 , write f_3
 - Suppose s_2 can read, write, execute p_2 and read f_3
- s_1 needs to run p_2
 - p_2 contains Trojan horse
 - So s_1 needs to ensure p_{12} (subject created when s_1 runs p_2) can't write to f_3
 - Ideally, p_{12} has capability $\{ (s_1, p_2, x) \}$ so no problem
 - In practice, p_{12} inherits s_1 's rights, so it can write to f_3 —bad! Note s_1 does not own f_3 , so can't change its rights over f_3
- Solution: restrict access by others

Authorization Denial Subset

- Defined for each user s_i
- Contains ACL entries that others cannot exercise over objects s_i owns
- In example: $R(s_2) = \{ (s_1, f_3, w) \}$
 - So when p_{12} tries to write to f_3 , as p_{12} owned by s_1 and f_3 owned by s_2 , system denies access
- Problem: how do you decide what should be in your authorization denial subset?

Karger's Scheme

- Base it on attribute of subject, object
- Interpose a knowledge-based subsystem to determine if requested file access reasonable
 - Sits between kernel and application
- Example: UNIX C compiler
 - Reads from files with names ending in “.c”, “.h”
 - Writes to files with names beginning with “/tmp/ctm” and assembly files with names ending in “.s”
- When subsystem invoked, if C compiler tries to write to “.c” file, request rejected

Lai and Gray

- Implemented modified version of Karger's scheme on UNIX system
 - Allow programs to access (read or write) files named on command line
 - Prevent access to other files
- Two types of processes
 - Trusted: no access checks or restrictions
 - Untrusted: valid access list (VAL) controls access and is initialized to command line arguments plus any temporary files that the process creates

File Access Requests

1. If file on VAL, use effective UID/GID of process to determine if access allowed
2. If access requested is read and file is world-readable, allow access
3. If process creating file, effective UID/GID controls allowing creation
 - Enter file into VAL as NNA (new non-argument); set permissions so no other process can read file
4. Ask user. If yes, effective UID/GID controls allowing access; if no, deny access

Example

- Assembler invoked from compiler
- `as x.s /tmp/ctm2345`
- and creates temp file `/tmp/as1111`
 - VAL is
 - `x.s /tmp/ctm2345 /tmp/as1111`
- Now Trojan horse tries to copy `x.s` to another file
 - On creation, file inaccessible to all except creating user so attacker cannot read it (rule 3)
 - If file created already and assembler tries to write to it, user is asked (rule 4), thereby revealing Trojan horse