CS165 – Computer Security

Dynamic (Fuzz) Testing

November 7, 2025

Our Goal

- We want to develop techniques to detect vulnerabilities automatically before they are exploited
  - What's a vulnerability?
  - How to find them?

Vulnerability

- How do you define computer 'vulnerability'?
  - *Flaw*
  - *Accessible to an adversary*
  - *Adversary has ability to exploit*

Problem

- How do we know if your program has a flaw?
  - May be likely, but not guaranteed
- More importantly, how do we locate a flaw?
  - To assess whether it is vulnerable
  - Or better yet, to fix the flaw

Example

- Can you find the flaw(s)?

```
1   int
2   im_vips2dz( IMAGE *in, const char *filename ){
3     char *p, *q;
4     char name[FILENAME_MAX];
5     char mode[FILENAME_MAX];
6     char buf[FILENAME_MAX];
7     ...
8
9     im_strncpy( name, filename, FILENAME_MAX );
10    if( (p = strchr( name, ':' )) ){
11      *p = '\0';
12      im_strncpy( mode, p + 1, FILENAME_MAX );
13    }
14
15    strcpy( buf, mode );
16    p = &buf[0];
17    ...
18  }
```

Flaw Evidence

- What indicates that your program has a flaw?

Flaw Evidence

- What indicates that your program has a flaw?
- A crash (i.e., memory error)
  - Means that an instruction accessed an illegal memory location
  - First example – read/write beyond bounds
- A hang (i.e., infinite loop)
  - Some loop condition check has an error
  - Second example - Not check for EOF

Find Flaws

- How can we find flaws?
  - Run the program
  - When it hangs/crashes, we have found a flaw
- Challenge
  - Flaw may only be triggered by particular inputs
  - The task of producing inputs to test your program for flaws is called dynamic analysis

Dynamic Analysis Options

- Regression Testing
  - Run program on many normal inputs and look for unexpected behavior in the responses
    - Typically looking for behavior that differs from expected – e.g., a previous version of the program
- Fuzz Testing
  - Run program on many abnormal inputs and look for termination behavior in the responses
    - Looking for behaviors that may cause the program to stop executing at all – crash or hang

Fuzz Testing

- Fuzz Testing
  - Idea proposed by Bart Miller at Wisconsin in 1988
- Problem: People assumed that utility programs could correctly process any input values
  - But, untrusted programs could run them
  - Supply any inputs they wanted (command line)
- Found that they could crash 25-33% of UNIX utility programs

Fuzz Testing

- Fuzz Testing
  - Idea proposed by Bart Miller at Wisconsin in 1988
- Approach
  - Generate random inputs
  - Run lots of programs using random inputs
  - Identify crashes of these programs
  - Correlate with the random inputs that caused the crashes
- Problems: Crashes and hangs

Example Found

- Fuzz Testing
  - Produce random inputs for processing

```
format.c (line 276):
...
while (lastc != '\n') {
rdc();
}
...

input.c (line 27):
rdc()
{ do { readchar(); }        // assigns 'lastc' to 0
while (lastc == ' ' || lastc == '\t'); return (lastc);
}
```

  - Eventually produce line with EOF in the middle

Fuzz Testing

- Idea: Search for flaws in a program by running the program under a variety of inputs
- Challenge: Selecting input values for the program
  - What should be the goals in choosing input values for fuzz testing?

Challenges

- Idea: Search for flaws in a program by running the program under a variety of inputs
- Challenge: Selecting input values for the program
  - What should be the goals in choosing input values for fuzz testing?
  - ***Find as many crashes/hangs as possible***
- Implies
  - Maximize code coverage (branches)
  - Generate inputs that cause crash/hang

Black Box Fuzzing

- Like Miller – Feed the program random inputs and see if it crashes
- Pros: Easy to configure
- Cons: May not search efficiently
  - May re-run the same path over again (low coverage)
  - May be very hard to generate inputs for certain paths (checksums, hashes, restrictive conditions)
  - May cause the program to terminate for logical reasons – fail format checks and stop

Black Box Fuzzing

- May be difficult to pass “authenticate_user” with random inputs

```
function( char *name, char *passwd, char *buf )
{
    if ( authenticate_user( name, passwd )) {
        if ( check_format( buf )) {
            update( buf );
        }
    }
}
```

Mutation-Based Fuzzing

- Supply a well-formed input
  - Generate random changes to that input
- No assumptions about modified input
  - Only assumes that variants of the well-formed input will be effective in fuzzing
- Example: zzuf
  - https://fuzzing-project.org/tutorial1.html
  - Reading: The Beginners' Guide to Fuzzing

Mutation-Based Fuzzing

- Example: zzuf
  - https://fuzzing-project.org/tutorial1.html
- The Beginners' Guide to Fuzzing
  - `zzuf -s 0:1000000 -c -C 0 -q -T 3 objdump -x win9x.exe`
  - Fuzzes the program `objdump` using the sample input executable `win9x.exe`
  - Try 1M seed values (-s) from command line (-c) and keep running if crashed (-C 0) with timeout (-T 3)

Mutation-Based Fuzzing

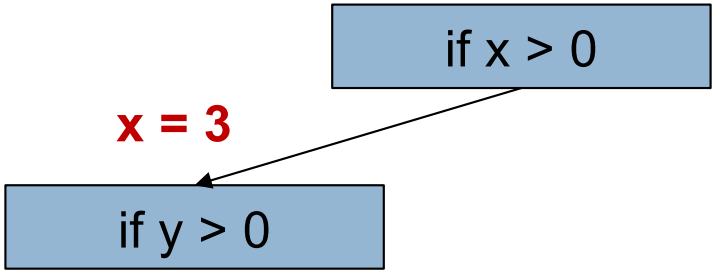
- Easy to setup, and not dependent on program details
- But may be strongly biased by the initial input
- Still prone to some problems
  - May re-run the same path over again (same test)
  - May be very hard to generate inputs for certain paths (checksums, hashes, restrictive conditions)
  - May not generate a legal value for executable (e.g., not constrained to legal instruction)

Grey Box Fuzzing

- Rather than treating the program as a black box, instrument the program to track the paths run
- Save inputs that lead to new paths
  - Associated with the paths they exercise
  - To bias toward running new paths
- Example
  - American Fuzzy Lop (AFL)
- "State of the practice" at this time

Grey Box Fuzzing

- Logical operation – instrument conditionals to record inputs that caused particular branches to run



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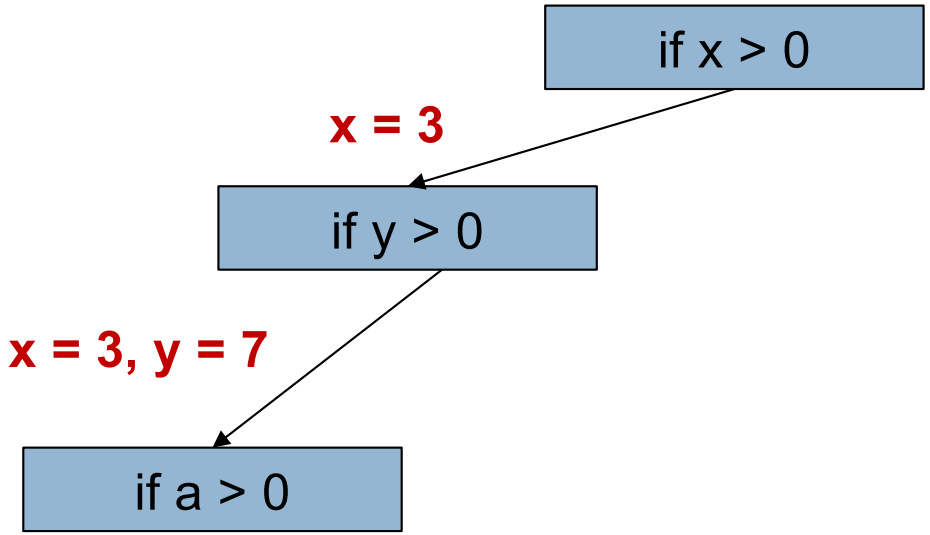

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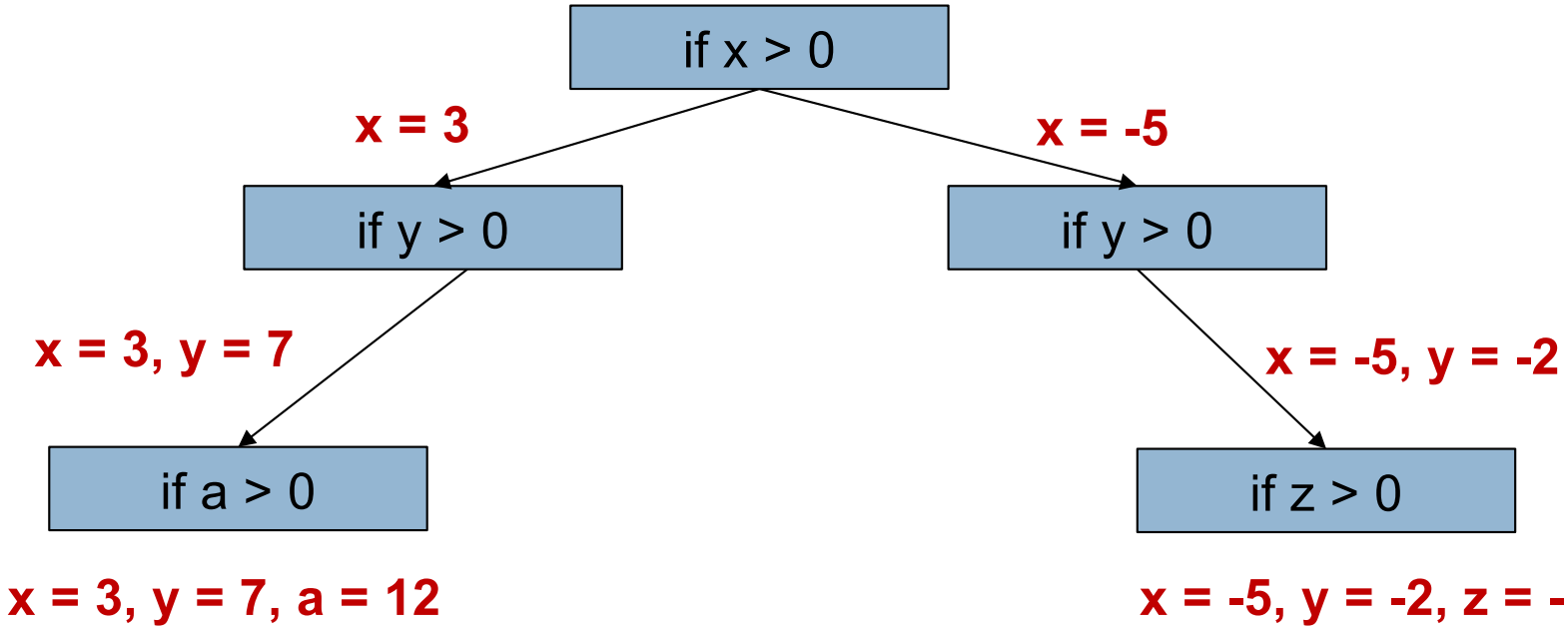

Track the branch coverage and generate inputs to explore new branches

AFL

- Provides compiler wrappers for gcc to instrument target program to collect fuzzing stats

AFL

- Provides compiler wrappers for gcc to instrument target program to collect fuzzing stats
- See
  - https://github.com/google/AFL

AFL Build

- Provides compiler wrappers for gcc to instrument target program to collect fuzzing stats
- Replace the gcc compiler in your build process with afl-gcc
- For example, in the Makefile
  - `CC=path-to/afl-gcc`
- Then build your target program with afl-gcc
  - Generates a binary instrumented for AFL fuzzing

AFL Use

- Provides compiler wrappers for gcc to instrument target program to collect fuzzing stats
- Run the fuzzer using afl-fuzz

```
path-to/afl-fuzz –i <input-dir> -o <output-dir> <path-to-bin> [args]
```

- For example

```
path-to/afl-fuzz –i input/ -o output/ ./cs165-obj @@ out
```

- Where
  - `input/` directory with the input file (to mutate)
  - `output/` is the directory where the AFL results will be placed

AFL Use

- Provides compiler wrappers for gcc to instrument target program to collect fuzzing stats
- Run the fuzzer using afl-fuzz

```
path-to/afl-fuzz –i <input-dir> -o <output-dir> <path-to-bin> [args]
```

- For example

```
path-to/afl-fuzz –i input/ -o output/ ./cs165-obj @@ out
```

- Where
  - `@@` shows the argument that will be fuzzed from the input file when mutated

AFL Display

- Tracks the execution of the fuzzer

- Key information are
  - “total paths” – number of different execution paths tried
  - “unique crashes” – number of unique crash locations
  - Time since “last uniq crash”

AFL Output

- Shows the results of the fuzzer
  - E.g., provides inputs that will cause the crash
- File “fuzzer_stats” provides summary of stats – UI
- File “plot_data” shows the progress of fuzzer
- Directory “queue” shows inputs that led to paths
- Directory “crashes” contains input that caused crash
- Directory “hangs” contains input that caused hang

AFL Operation

- How does AFL work?
  - http://lcamtuf.coredump.cx/afl/technical_details.txt
- The instrumentation captures branch (edge) coverage, along with coarse branch-taken hit counts.
  - `shared_mem[cur_location ^ prev_location]++;`
- Record branches taken (previous branch to current branch) with low collision rate
- Enables distinguishing unique paths

AFL Operation

- How does AFL work?
  - http://lcamtuf.coredump.cx/afl/technical_details.txt
- “When a mutated input produces an execution trace containing new tuples, the corresponding input file is preserved and routed for additional processing”
  - Otherwise, input is discarded
- “Mutated test cases that produced new state transitions [as above] are added to the input queue and used as a starting point for future rounds of fuzzing”

AFL Operation

- How does AFL work?
  - http://lcamtuf.coredump.cx/afl/technical_details.txt
- Fuzzing strategies
  - Highly deterministic at first – bit flips, add/sub integer values, and choose interesting integer values
  - Then, non-deterministic choices – insertions, deletions, and combinations of test cases

Grey Box Fuzzing

- Finds flaws, but still does not understand the program
- Pros: Much better than black box testing
  - Essentially no configuration
  - Lots of crashes have been identified
- Cons: Still a bit of a stab in the dark
  - May not be able to execute some paths
  - Searches for inputs independently from the program
  - Can leverage techniques like symbolic execution to help
- Need to improve the effectiveness further

Conclusions

- It is important to detect vulnerabilities in your programs before adversaries find them
- Dynamic testing has long been a way to find problems in your programs
  - But, we need a more comprehensive form of testing to detect vulnerabilities to memory errors
- Fuzz testing is designed to find memory errors in your programs
  - Generate inputs that: (1) run as much of the program as possible and (2) try values that may cause crash/hang

Questions