

CSE 484 / CSE M 584: Computer Security and Privacy

Software Security: Buffer Overflow Attacks

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Tadayoshi Kohno
yoshi@cs

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Announcements

- Things Due:
 - Ethics form: Due Monday
 - Homework #1: Due Thursday
- Office Hours:
 - Now scheduled, see course website
 - Via Zoom – find links on Canvas
 - Mine are Wednesdays (bet for overall class questions, homeworks; TA office hours for labs, homeworks, other overall questions)

Last time...

- Threat models
 - Assets
 - Adversaries
 - Vulnerabilities
 - Threats
 - Risks
- Defenses
 - Adversary's asymmetric advantage

SOFTWARE SECURITY

Bugs, Vulnerabilities, and Exploits

- Bug
 - Not working quite right
- Vulnerability
 - A malfunction that can be used for an adversary's goals
- Exploit
 - The mechanical set of operations to make use of a vulnerability

Adversarial Failures

- Software bugs are bad
 - Consequences can be serious
- Even worse when an **intelligent adversary** wishes to **exploit** them!
 - Intelligent adversaries: Force bugs into “**worst possible**” conditions/states
 - Intelligent adversaries: Pick their targets

Many types of vulnerability

Memory Corruption Bugs

- **Buffer overflows bugs:** Big class of bugs
 - Normal conditions: Can sometimes cause systems to fail
 - Adversarial conditions: Attacker able to violate security of your system (control, obtain private information, ...)
- Stack, Heap both possibilities

BUFFER OVERFLOWS

A Bit of History: Morris Worm

- Worm was released in 1988 by Robert Morris
 - Graduate student at Cornell, son of NSA chief scientist
 - Convicted under Computer Fraud and Abuse Act,
 - 3 years probation and 400 hours of community service
- Worm was intended to propagate slowly and harmlessly measure the size of the Internet
- Due to a coding error, it created new copies as fast as it could and overloaded infected machines
- \$10-100M worth of damage

Morris Worm and Buffer Overflow

- One of the worm's propagation techniques was a **buffer overflow attack** against a vulnerable version of `fingerd` on VAX systems
 - By sending special string to finger daemon, worm caused it to execute code creating a new worm copy

Buffer overflows remain a common source of vulnerabilities and exploits today!

(Especially in embedded systems.)

Aside: Famous Internet Worms

- Morris worm (1988): overflow in `fingerd`
 - 6,000 machines infected
- CodeRed (2001): overflow in MS-IIS server
 - 300,000 machines infected in 14 hours
- SQL Slammer (2003): overflow in MS-SQL server
 - 75,000 machines infected in **10 minutes** (!!)
- Sasser (2005): overflow in Windows LSASS
 - Around 500,000 machines infected

... And More

- Conficker (2008-09): overflow in Windows RPC
 - Around 10 million machines infected (estimates vary)
- Stuxnet (2009-10): several zero-day overflows + same Windows RPC overflow as Conficker
 - Windows print spooler service
 - Windows LNK shortcut display
 - Windows task scheduler
- Flame (2010-12): same print spooler and LNK overflows as Stuxnet
 - Targeted cyperespionage virus
- These days, worms are uncommon

... And More

- Embedded systems
 - E.g., our automotive work
- Formative and foundational for software security

Attacks on Memory Buffers

- **Buffer** is a pre-defined data storage area inside computer memory (stack or heap)
- Typical situation:
 - A function takes some input that it writes into a **pre-allocated buffer**.
 - The developer **forgets to check** that the size of the input isn't larger than the size of the buffer.
 - **Uh oh.**
 - “Normal” bad input: crash
 - “Adversarial” bad input : take control of execution

Stack Buffers



buf

uh oh!

- Suppose Web server contains this function

```
void func(char *str) {  
    char buf[126];  
    ...  
    strcpy(buf, str);  
    ...  
}
```

- No bounds checking on `strcpy()`
- If `str` is longer than 126 bytes
 - Program may crash
 - Attacker may change program behavior

Example: Changing Flags



buf

1 (:-)!

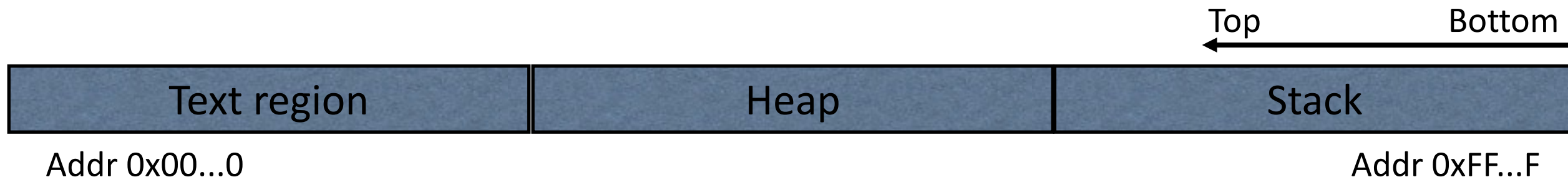
- Suppose Web server contains this function

```
void func(char *str) {  
    byte auth = 0;  
    char buf[126];  
    ...  
    strcpy(buf, str);  
    ...  
}
```

- **Authenticated** variable non-zero when user has extra privileges
- Morris worm also overflowed a buffer to overwrite an authenticated flag in fingerd

Memory Layout

- **Text region:** Executable code of the program
- **Heap:** Dynamically allocated data
- **Stack:** Local variables, function return addresses; grows and shrinks as functions are called and return



Stack Buffers

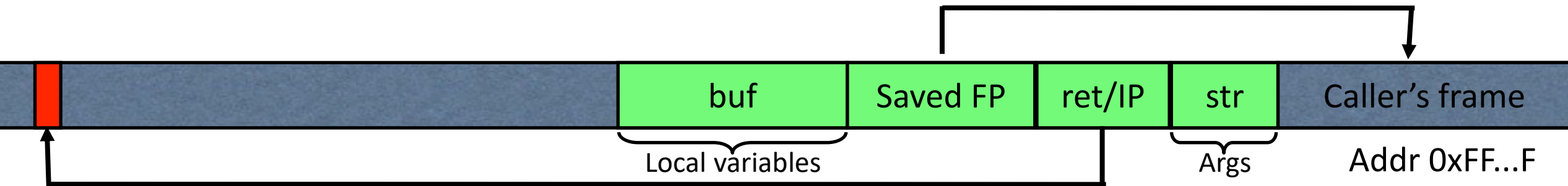
- Suppose Web server contains this function:

```
void func(char *str) {  
    char buf[126];  
    strcpy(buf, str);  
}
```

Allocate local buffer
(126 bytes reserved on stack)

Copy argument into local buffer

- When this function is invoked, a new **frame** (activation record) is pushed onto the stack.



Execute code at this address after func() finishes

What if Buffer is Overstuffed?

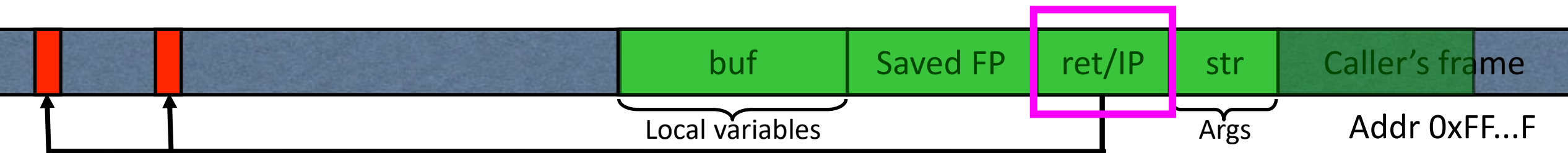
- Memory pointed to by str is copied onto stack...

```
void func(char *str) {  
    char buf[126];  
    strcpy(buf, str);  
}
```

strcpy does NOT check whether the string at *str contains fewer than 126 characters

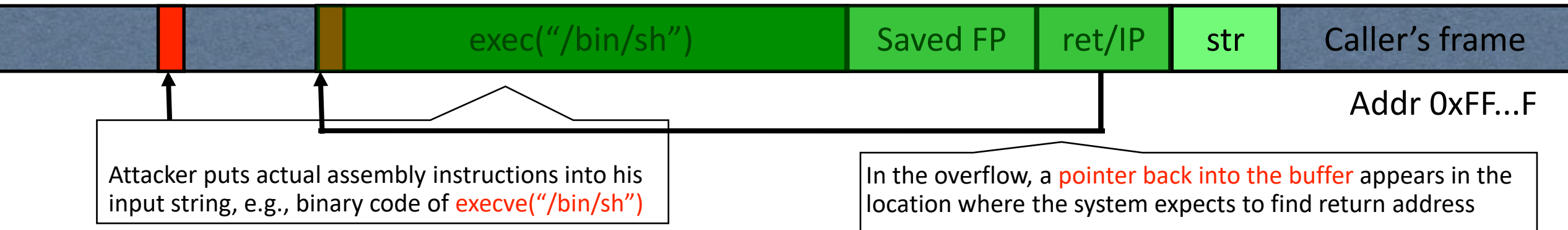
- If a string longer than 126 bytes is copied into buffer, it will overwrite adjacent stack locations.

This will be interpreted as return address!



Executing Attack Code

- Suppose buffer contains attacker-created string
 - For example, `str` points to a string received from the network as the URL



- When function exits, code in the buffer will be executed, giving attacker a shell ("**shellcode**")
 - **Root shell** if the victim program is `setuid root`

Buffer Overflows Can Be Tricky...

- Overflow portion of the buffer must contain **correct address of attack code** in the RET position
 - The value in the RET position must point to the beginning of attack assembly code in the buffer
 - Otherwise application will (probably) crash with segfault
 - **Attacker must correctly guess in which stack position his/her buffer will be when the function is called**

Problem: No Bounds Checking

- strcpy does not check input size
 - strcpy(buf, str) simply copies memory contents into buf starting from *str until “\0” is encountered, ignoring the size of area allocated to buf
- Many C library functions are unsafe
 - strcpy(char *dest, const char *src)
 - strcat(char *dest, const char *src)
 - gets(char *s)
 - scanf(const char *format, ...)
 - printf(const char *format, ...)

Does Bounds Checking Help?

- `strncpy(char *dest, const char *src, size_t n)`
 - If `strncpy` is used instead of `strcpy`, no more than `n` characters will be copied from `*src` to `*dest`
 - Programmer has to supply the right value of `n`
- Potential overflow in `htpasswd.c` (Apache 1.3):

```
strcpy(record, user);  
strcat(record, ":");  
strcat(record, cpw);
```

Copies username ("user") into buffer ("record"), then appends ":" and hashed password ("cpw")

- Published fix:

```
strncpy(record, user, MAX_STRING_LEN-1);  
strcat(record, ":");  
strncat(record, cpw, MAX_STRING_LEN-1);
```

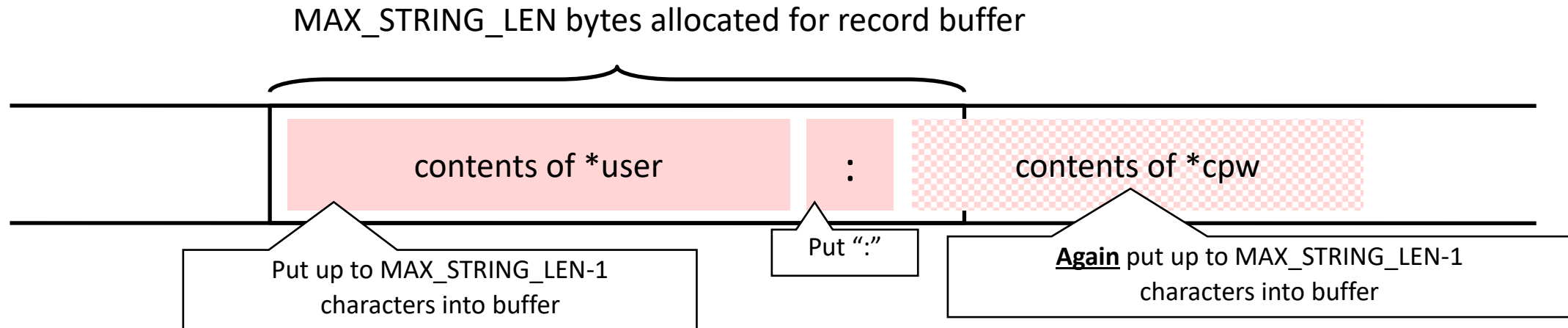

Breakout Activity

Canvas -> Quizzes -> April 2

Misuse of strncpy in httpasswd “Fix”

- Published “fix” for Apache httpasswd overflow:

```
strncpy(record,user,MAX_STRING_LEN-1);  
strcat(record,":")  
strncat(record,cpw,MAX_STRING_LEN-1);
```



What About This?

- Home-brewed range-checking string copy

```
void mycopy(char *input) {
    char buffer[512]; int i;

    for (i=0; i<=512; i++)
        buffer[i] = input[i];
}

void main(int argc, char *argv[]) {
    if (argc==2)
        mycopy(argv[1]);
}
```

Breakout Activity

Canvas -> Quizzes -> April 2

Off-By-One Overflow

- Home-brewed range-checking string copy

```
void mycopy(char *input) {
    char buffer[512]; int i;

    for (i=0; i<=512; i++)
        buffer[i] = input[i];
}
void main(int argc, char *argv[]) {
    if (argc==2)
        mycopy(argv[1]);
}
```

This will copy 513 characters into buffer. Oops!

- 1-byte overflow: can't change RET, but can change pointer to previous stack frame...

Frame Pointer Overflow

