Scalable, Behavior-Based Malware Clustering

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Motivation

• Thousands of new malware samples appear each day
• Automatic analysis systems allow us to create thousands of analysis reports
• Now a way to group the reports is needed. We would like to cluster them into sets of malware reports that exhibit similar behavior.
  – we require automated clustering techniques
• Clustering allows us to:
  – discard reports of samples that have been seen before
  – guide an analyst in the selection of those samples that require most attention
  – derive generalized signatures, implement removal procedures that work for a whole class of samples
Scalable, Behavior-Based Malware Clustering

• **Malware Clustering:** Find a partitioning of a given set of malware samples into subsets so that subsets share some common traits (i.e., find “virus families”)

• **Behavior-Based:** A malware sample is represented by its actions performed at run-time

• **Scalable:** It has to work for large sets of malware samples
System Overview

Dynamic Analysis of the Sample

Result

Execution Trace augmented with taint-information and network analysis results

Input

Extraction of the Behavioral Profile

Result

Behavioral Profile

Clustering

Input
Dynamic Analysis

• Based on our existing automatic, dynamic analysis system called Anubis
  – Anubis is a full-system emulator
  – Anubis generates an execution trace listing all invoked system calls

• In this work, we extended Anubis with:
  – system call dependencies (Tainting)
  – control flow dependencies
  – network analysis (for accurately describing a sample’s network behavior)

• Output of this step: Execution trace augmented with taint information and network analysis results
Extraction Of The Behavioral Profile

• In this step, we process the execution trace provided by the ‘dynamic analysis’ step

• Goal: abstract from the system call trace
  – system calls can vary significantly, even between programs that exhibit the same behavior
  – remove execution-specific artifacts from the trace

• A behavioral profile is an abstraction of the program's execution trace that accurately captures the behavior of the binary
Reasons For An Abstract Behavioral Description

• Different ways to read from a file:
  
  A: 
  ```c
  f = fopen("C:\\test");
  read(f, 1);
  read(f, 1);
  read(f, 1);
  ```

  B: 
  ```c
  f = fopen("C:\\test");
  read(f, 3);
  ```

• Different system calls with similar semantics
  – e.g., NtCreateProcess, NtCreateProcessEx

• You can easily interleave the trace with unrelated calls:
  ```c
  C: 
  f = fopen("C:\\test");
  read(f, 1);
  readRegValue(..);
  read(f, 1);
  ```
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  ```
Elements Of A Behavioral Profile

- OS Objects: represent a resource such as a file that can be manipulated via system calls
  - has a name and a type
- OS Operations: generalization of a system call
  - carried out on an OS object
  - the order of operations is irrelevant
  - the number of operations on a certain resource does not matter
- Object Dependencies: model dependencies between OS objects (e.g., a copy operation from a source file to a target file)
  - also reflect the true order of operations
- Control Flow Dependencies: reflect how tainted data is used by the program (comparisons with tainted data)
Example: Behavioral Profile

```
src = NtOpenFile("C:\\sample.exe");
// memory map the target file
dst = NtCreateFile("C:\Windows\" + GetTempFilename());
dst_section = NtCreateSection(dst);
char *base = NtMapViewOfSection(dst_section);
while(len < length(src)) {
    *(base+len)=NtReadFile(src, 1); len++;
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Scalable Clustering

• Most clustering algorithms require to compute the distances between all pairs of points => $O(n^2)$
• We use LSH (locality sensitive hashing), a technique introduced by Indyk and Motwani, to compute an approximate clustering that requires less than $n^2$ distance computations
• Our clustering algorithm takes as input a set of malware samples where each malware sample is represented as a set of features ⇒ we have to transform each behavioral profile into a feature set first
• Our similarity measure: Jaccard Index defined as

$$J(a, b) = \frac{|a \cap b|}{|a \cup b|}$$
LSH Clustering

• We are performing an approximate, single-linkage hierarchical clustering:

• Step 1: Locality Sensitive Hashing
  – to cluster a set of samples we have to choose a similarity threshold \( t \)
  – the result is an approximation of the true set of all near (as defined by the parameter \( t \)) pairs

• Step 2: Single-Linkage hierarchical clustering
Evaluating Clustering Quality

For assessing the quality of the clustering algorithm, we compare our clustering results with a reference clustering of the same sample set

- since no reference clustering for malware exists, we had to create it first

Reference Clustering:

1. we obtained a random sampling of 14,212 malware samples that were submitted to Anubis from Oct. 27th 2007 to Jan. 31st 2008
2. we scanned each sample with 6 different virus scanners
3. we selected only those samples for which the majority of the anti-virus programs reported the same malware family. This resulted in a total of 2,658 samples.
4. we manually corrected classification problems
Quantitative Evaluation

- We ran our clustering algorithm with a similarity threshold $t = 0.7$ on the reference set of 2,658 samples.
- Our system produced 87 clusters while the reference clustering consists of 84 clusters.

- Precision: 0.984
  - precision measures how well a clustering algorithm distinguishes between samples that are different

- Recall: 0.930
  - recall measures how well a clustering algorithm recognizes similar samples
## Comparative Evaluation

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Behavioral Description</th>
<th>Similarity Measure</th>
<th>Clustering</th>
<th>Optimal Threshold</th>
<th>Quality</th>
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<td>Exact</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.916</td>
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Performance Evaluation

• Input: 75,692 malware samples

• Previous work by Bailey et al (extrapolated from their results of 500 samples):
  Number of distance calculations: 2,864,639,432
  Time for a single distance calculation: 1.25 ms
  Runtime: 995 hours (~ 6 weeks)

• Our results:
  Number of distance calculations: 66,528,049
  Runtime: 2h 18min
Conclusions

• Novel approach for clustering large collections of malware samples
  – dynamic analysis
  – extraction of behavioral profiles
  – clustering algorithm that requires less than a quadratic amount of distance calculations

• Experiments on real-world datasets that demonstrate that our techniques can accurately recognize malicious code that behaves in a similar fashion

• Available online: http://anubis.iseclab.org