

Security Mechanisms
CS 239
Computer Security
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Outline

- Security tools
- Access control

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Tools for Security

- Physical security
- Access control
- Encryption
- Authentication
- Encapsulation
- Intrusion detection
- Common sense

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Physical Security

- Lock up your computer
 - Actually, sometimes a good answer
- But what about networking?
 - Networks poke a hole in the locked door
- In any case, lack of physical security often makes other measures pointless

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Access Controls

- Only let authorized parties access the system
- A lot trickier than it sounds
- Particularly in a network environment
- Once data is outside your system, how can you continue to control it?
 - Again, of concern in network environments

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Encryption

- Algorithms to hide the content of data or communications
- Only those knowing a secret can decrypt the protection
- One of the most important tools in computer security

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Encryption is Not a Panacea

- Encryption is usually breakable
 - Given enough time and resources
- Encryption can't protect everything
- Encryption is only as good as the security measures that use it

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Authentication

- Methods of ensuring that someone is who they say they are
- Vital for access control
- But also vital for many other purposes
- Often (but not always) based on encryption

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Encapsulation

- Methods of allowing outsiders limited access to your resources
- Let them use or access some things
 - But not everything
- Simple, in concept
- Extremely challenging, in practice

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Intrusion Detection

- All security methods sometimes fail
- When they do, notice that something is wrong
- And take steps to correct the problem
- Reactive, not preventative
 - But unrealistic to believe any prevention is certain
- Must be automatic to be really useful

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Common Sense

- A lot of problems arise because people don't like to think
- The best security tools generally fail if people use them badly
- If the easiest way in is to fool people, that's what attackers will do

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The Depressing Truth

- Ultimately, computer security is a losing battle
- Nothing will ever work 100%
- Nothing will work forever
- All your efforts will eventually be undone
- It's like housework – doing it doesn't make the house clean tomorrow, but not doing it guarantees the house is dirty today

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Access Control

- Security could be easy
 - If we didn't want anyone to get access to anything
- The trick is giving access to only the right people
- How do we ensure that a given resource can only be accessed by the proper people?

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Goals for Access Control

- Complete mediation
- Least privilege
- Useful in a networked environment
- Scalability
- Cost and usability

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Access Control Mechanisms

- Directories
- Access control lists
- Capabilities
- Access control matrices

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The Language of Access Control

- *Subjects* are active entities that want to gain access to something
 - E.g., users or programs
- *Objects* represent things that can be accessed
 - E.g., files, devices, database records
- *Access* is any form of interaction with an object
- An entity can be both subject and object

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Directories

- Each user has a list of the items he can access
 - With the associated rights
- When a user wants to access an item, look it up in his directory

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Problems With the Directory Approach

- Per-user directories get very large
 - Overhead and performance problems
- Universal revocation of access
- Pseudonym problems
- Works poorly in networks
- This method is not widely used

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Access Control Lists

- For each protected resource, maintain a single list
- Each list entry specifies a user who can access the resource
 - And the allowable modes of access
- When a user requests access to a resource, check the access control list (ACL)

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ACL Objects and Subjects

- In ACL terminology, the resources being protected are *objects*
- The entities attempting to access them are *subjects*
 - Allowing finer granularity of control than per-user

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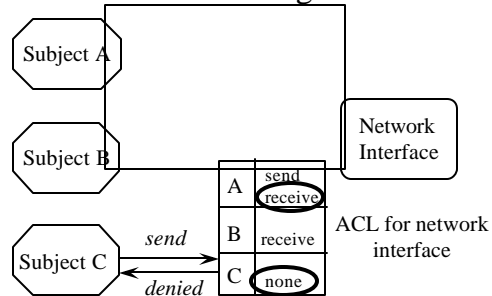
ACL Example

- An operating system example:
 - Using ACLs to protect a network interface device (an object)
- User (Subject) A is allowed to receive from and send to the device
- User (Subject) B may only receive from it
- User (Subject) C may not access it

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An ACL Protecting a Device



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Issues for Access Control Lists

- How do you know the requestor is who he says he is?
- How do you protect the access control list from modification?
- How do you determine what resources a user can access?

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ACLs in Practice

- Unix file permissions are a limited form of an ACL
 - Only *owner*, *group*, and *all* can have ACL entries
 - Only read/write/execute controls are available
- Other systems (like modern Windows systems) have more general ACL mechanisms

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ACLs and Wildcards

- Can specify a whole range of subjects who share same access rights to object
- E.g., “all members of the software development team can read this file”
- Shortens the lists
- But leads to questions of conflicts

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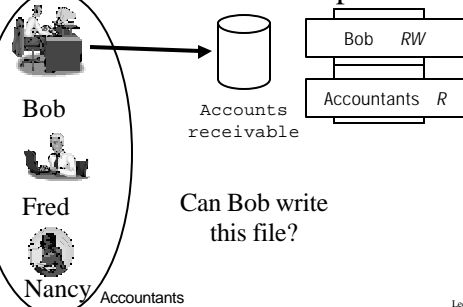
Conflicts in ACLs

- What if a given subject matches more than one rule in an ACL?

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ACL Conflict Example



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How To Handle ACL Conflicts

- Give most liberal rights
- Give most restrictive rights
- Deal with list in order
 - Giving first rights found
 - Or last rights found

Any of these solutions might be best in particular circumstances

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An Example System

- In Unix file access permissions, determine identity
 - Owner, group member, other
- Test only rights for the highest group
- If I own the file, test owner rights
 - Even if I’m in the group and group rights are more liberal

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Pros and Cons of ACLs

- + Easy to figure out who can access a resource
- + Easy to revoke or change access permissions
 - Hard to figure out what a subject can access
 - Changing access rights requires getting to the object

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Capabilities

- Each subject keeps a set of data items that specify his allowable accesses
- Essentially, a set of tickets
- Possession of the capability for an object implies that access is allowed

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Properties of Capabilities

- Must be unforgeable
 - In single machine, keep under control of OS
 - What about in a networked system?
- In most systems, some capabilities allow creation of other capabilities
 - Process can pass restricted set of capabilities to a subprocess

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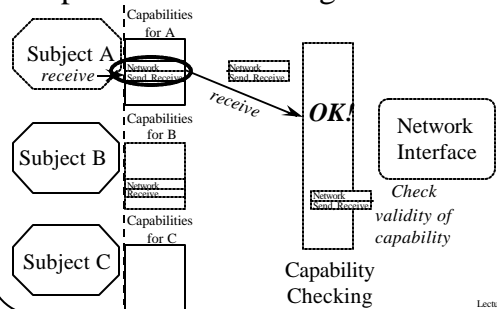
Capabilities and Domains

- The set of objects a subject can access at a given moment is its domain
 - The subject has a capability for each object in its domain
- Domains can be expanded by obtaining new capabilities
- New domains can be created for subprocesses
- Where do we keep capabilities?

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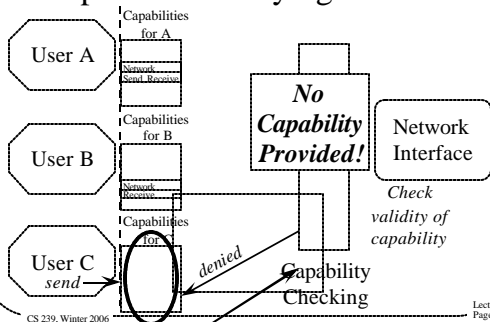
Capabilities Protecting a Device



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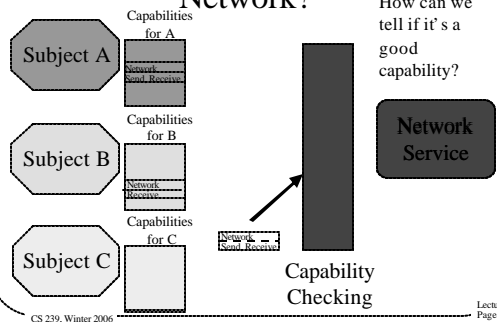
Capabilities Denying Access



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How Will This Work in a Network?



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Revoking Capabilities

How do we take away Fred's capability?

Without taking away Nancy's?

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Revocation By Destroying the Capability

How can you be sure you've destroyed all copies everywhere?

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Revocation By Invalidation on Use

Costs time to check revocation list

Especially if list gets long

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Revocation By Generation Numbers

If generation numbers match, the capability is still valid

To invalidate capability, increase generation number

Requires some control of capabilities

Selective revocation is hard

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Revocation by Indirection Through a Token

To revoke, destroy the token

Selective revocation somewhat slow

Nancy must go through the slow procedure again to set up a new token

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Pros and Cons of Capabilities

- + Easy to determine what a subject can access
- + Potentially faster than ACLs (in some circumstances)
- + Easy model for transfer of privileges
- Hard to determine who can access an object
- Requires extra mechanism to allow revocation
- In network environment, need cryptographic methods to prevent forgery

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ACLs, Capabilities, Complete Mediation, & Performance

- Ideally, every data access should have access control independently applied
- Practicality of doing so depends on the performance costs
- What does it cost to use ACLs?
 - Capabilities?

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Performance Issues of Access Control

- What if the status of the access control mechanism changed between when last checked and current access?
- Common case is nothing changes
- Different approaches possible
 - Actually check changeable data structure on each access
 - Give process something cheap and revocable that allows access

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Access Control in the Distributed World

- ACLs still work OK
 - Provided you have a global namespace for subjects
 - And no one can masquerade
- Capabilities are more problematic
 - Their security relies on unforgeability

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Using Cryptographic Capabilities

- Can cryptography make capabilities unforgeable?
- It can make it impossible to create them from nothing
 - And only usable by their owner
- But it can't make them uncopyable
- So cryptographic capability systems must assume they can be freely copied

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Access Control Matrices

- A very general access control concept
- In principle, ACLs are a 1-D list of who is permitted to access one object
- And capabilities are a 1-D list of what one subject can access
- Access control matrices are a 2-D description of access rights

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Access Control Matrix Example

	File A	File B	Network	Printer	Objects
User 1	rw	r		w	
User 2	r		sr	w	
Sysadmin	rw	rw	sr	rw configure	
Guest			sr		
Subjects	File B's ACL				User 2's Capabilities

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Pros and Cons of Access Control Matrices

- + Makes all access issues explicit and easy to find
- + Easy to tell who can access a resource, and what resources anyone can access
- Matrix very sparse, so inefficient
- Hard to achieve good performance
- More important conceptually than in implementations

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Role Based Access Control

- Not really an alternative to ACLs, capabilities, access control matrix
- Rather, a more complex way of looking at access control subjects
- Commonly used in systems that care about security

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The Idea Behind Role Based Access Control

- Each user has certain roles he can take while using the system
- At any given time, the user is performing a certain role
- Give the user access to only those things that are required to fulfill that role

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A Simple Example

- Fred is a system administrator
 - Which requires him to install programs, examine logs, etc.
- Fred also reads email, looks at web sites, etc., like any other user
- Fred should operate under one role while doing normal work
 - And a different role while performing administrative tasks

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Continuing With the Example

- Fred logs on as “fred”
- He reads his email as “fred”
- He decides to upgrade the C++ compiler
 - So he changes roles to “administrator”
- When he’s done, he returns to the role of “fred”

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What Has Been Gained?

- While reading mail and surfing the web, Fred isn’t able to upgrade the C++ compiler
 - He doesn’t have the access rights
- So if he accidentally downloads malicious code, it can’t “upgrade” the compiler

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Changing Roles

- Role based access control only helps if changing roles isn't trivial
 - Otherwise, the malicious code merely changes roles before doing anything else
- Typically requires providing some secure form of authentication
 - Which proves you have the right to change roles
 - Usually passwords, but other methods possible

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Practical Limitations on Role Based Access Control

- Number of roles per user
- Problems of disjoint role privileges
- System administration overheads

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Number of Roles Per User

- Each new role requires new authentication
- Less secure if the authentication is the same for each role
 - E.g., Unix `sudo`, which only requires your basic password
- How many passwords will people remember?
 - And how often will they be happy to type them?

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Problems of Disjoint Roles

- Each role should have disjoint privileges
 - More secure if roles aren't supersets of other roles
- May cause difficulties if certain operations require privileges from different roles

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Problems of System Administration

- Access control is only useful if the permissions are set correctly for each subject and object
- The more subjects there are, the more work system administrators must do
 - Since each subject needs to get only the proper privileges

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Reference Monitors

- Whatever form it takes, access control must be instantiated in actual code
 - That checks if a given attempt to reference an object should be allowed
- That code is called a reference monitor
- Obviously, good reference monitors are critical for system security

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Desirable Properties of Reference Monitors

- Correctness
- Proper placement
- Efficiency
- Simplicity
- Flexibility

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An Example Reference Monitor

- The Linux code that mediates file access
- Applied on relatively few of the file system calls
 - Open, execute, directory traversal, a few others
 - Not on read and write

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Another Example Reference Monitor

- A firewall
- It examines every packet for certain characteristics
- Typically, either any subject can do something or no subject can
- But sometimes packets from particular source addresses can do more
 - Essentially, the source address identifies a privileged subject

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Thinking More Broadly About Access Control

- From one perspective, access control is the core of all computer security
- All security is about who can access what
- So where do security problems come from?
 - Not applying access control
 - Not applying access control properly

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What Is the Most Common Access Control Mechanism?

- The null mechanism
- Let anyone do anything they want
- Sounds terrible, but it's actually the key to the success of computers and networks

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Why Is Null Access Control Ever Good?

- Any user can run an instruction on a CPU without necessarily checking access control
- Any packet can be handled by a router without checking access control
- The trick is to apply access control when it's most important
 - And to apply it properly

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Problems Arising From Null Access Control

- Spam
- Distributed denial of service
 - And most other denials of service
- Buffer overflows
- Worms

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Proper Application of Access Control

Where do problems actually arise?

1. Not applying access control when you should
2. Improper configuration of access control
3. Bugs in access control mechanisms

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Conclusion

- Much of security relates to allowing some people access to some resources
- While preventing the same access to others
- Without some method of determining who should access what . . .

You can't do that

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