Between Worlds: Securing Mixed JS/AS Multi-Party Web Content

Phu H. Phung, Maliheh Monshizadeh, Meera Sridhar, Kevin W. Hamlen, and V.N. Venkatakrishnan
Loading a Web Advertisement

Client (web browser)

Page Publisher

URL Request
Loading a Web Advertisement

Client (web browser) → Page Publisher

web page
Loading a Web Advertisement
Loading a Web Advertisement

Client (web browser)

Ad Network

ad tag

Page Publisher
Loading a Web Advertisement

Client (web browser)

Page Publisher

Ad Network

Ad Server

URL request
Loading a Web Advertisement

Client (web browser)

Ad Network

Page Publisher

Ad Server

ad
Ads Behaving Badly

• Many well-known language-specific (e.g., JS/Flash) attacks
  • invisible iframe expansion (JS)
  • DOM API hijacking (JS)
  • malformed binary that exploits VM parser error (Flash)

• A newly emerging class of attacks: cross-domain attacks
  • Many ads are part JS and part Flash – opens new attack vectors
  • SOP Circumvention: JS and Flash have *different* Same-Origin Policies!
    • not easily reconcilable, since computation models differ between languages
  • Cross-domain heap-spraying attacks
    • separate payload injector from payload execution across different languages
  • Cross-principal resource abuse
    • Flash ads use allowDomain("*") (!!!)
Non-LBS Approaches

• Turn off JS/Flash/both
  • kills the revenue model of the internet

• Change JS/Flash VMs and/or browser to fix loopholes and weaknesses
  • requires cooperation and standardization of all client browsers and VMs
  • requires all end-users to update their browsers

• Adopt best coding practices when creating ads
  • assumes ad-creators know anything about coding

• Validate ads at the ad network level
  • Ad networks often never see the ad that the end-user sees!

• What if I’m a page-publisher and I want to protect my visitors, irrespective of which client browsers they may be using? How do I secure my page?
LBS Approach: In-lined Reference Monitors

• Idea: Page-publisher puts a script on her page that rewrites and secures ad code dynamically, as it arrives on the end-user’s browser!
  • no change to browsers or VMs required
  • no separate, special software installations for end-users (e.g., no plug-ins)
  • browser-agnostic (use purely standards-compliant JS/Flash code)
  • can enforce publisher-specific policies
    • Example: no pop-ups allowed on pages where the page’s menu is a pop-up

• Challenges:
  • JS is incredibly dynamic (code constantly generated from strings)
  • JS-Flash interaction is very insecure—hard to completely mediate
  • JS is absurdly mutable (can destructively assign to DOM API functions!!)
FlashJaX Architecture and Workflow

- ActionScript
- JavaScript
- IRM
- Policy Engine (JS)

Security-relevant operations:
- ActionScript IRM
- JavaScript IRM

Delegation of JavaScript operations:
- JavaScript IRM

Security check and verdict:
- Policy Engine (JS)
function() {
    var principal = "bottom";
    getPrincipal = function() { return principal; }
}) ();

y = getPrincipal(); // assigns y:"bottom";
principal = "root";   // error: no such variable "principal"!
(function() {
    var principal = "bottom";
    getPrincipal = function() { return principal; }
    var wrap_window = function(w) {
        var o_open = w.open;
        w.open = function() {
            if (isAllowed(principal, "open", arguments))
                return wrap_window(o_open.apply(this, arguments));
            else return null;
        }
        return w;
    }
    wrap_window(window);
})();
Event Attribution: Shadow Stack of Principals

(function() {
    var shadowStack = [];

    var runAs = function(principal, f) {
        shadowStack.push(principal);
        f.apply = js.Function.apply; // un-hijack f.apply...!
        var r = f.apply(this, js.Ararry, prototype.slice.call(arguments, 2));
        shadowStack.pop();
        flush_write(principal); // handles runtime code gen
        if (typeof r !== "undefined") return r;
    }

    ...

})();

Attribution Challenge: Dynamic Code Generation

• Which principal to pass to runAs(principal,f) for each f?

• Static Scripts
  • Publisher labels html subtrees that she “owns” as trusted
  • Publisher labels ad network code blocks as untrusted
  • Multiple ad networks can have mutually distrusting labels (to stop wars)

• Problem: What about runtime generated code?
  • JS scripts regularly generate code from strings at runtime (ugh!)
  • Most common (and most general) method: document.write(s);
HTML Document Load Process (simplified)

```html
<html>
  <script>
    alert('hello');
    s = "script>";
    document.write("<"+s+"alert('cruel');</"+s);
  </script>
</html>
```

Input Stream (from web server):

```
<html><script>alert('hello ‘);s="script>";document.write("<"+s+"alert('cruel');</"+s);
```

Output:
HTML Document Load Process (simplified)

```html
<html>
  <script>
    alert('hello ');
    s = "script>";
    document.write("<"+s+"alert('cruel');"+s);
  </script>
</html>
```

Input Stream (from web server):

```html
<script>alert(' world');</script>
```

Output:

```
hello
```
HTML Document Load Process (simplified)

```html
<html>
  <script>
    alert('hello ');
    s = "script>";
    document.write("<"+s+"alert('cruel');</"+s);
  </script>
  <script> alert('cruel'); </script>
</html>
```

Input Stream (from web server):
```
<script>alert('cruel');</script>
```

Output:
```
hello
```
HTML Document Load Process (simplified)

```html
<html>
  <script>
    alert('hello ');
    s = "script">
    document.write("\"+s+"alert('cruel');\"+s);
  </script>
  <script> alert('cruel'); </script>
  <script> alert(' world'); </script>
</html>
```

Input Stream (from web server):
```
<script>alert(' world');</script>...
```

Output:
```
hello cruel
```
HTML Document Load Process (simplified)

```html
<html>
  <script>
    alert('hello ');
    s = "script>";
    document.write("<"+s+"alert('cruel');</"+s);
  </script>
  <script> alert('cruel'); </script>
  <script> alert(' world'); </script>
</html>
```

Input Stream (from web server):

Output:

```
hello cruel world
```
Dynamic Codegen Challenges

• First step: Replace `document.write` with a wrapper
  • use DOM API hijacking again (same as mediation approach)

• But what should the wrapper do?
  • must parse a string into JavaScript code
    • (build our own HTML+JS parser in JS? ugh!)
  • What if the dynamically generated code generates more code dynamically when executed?
    • Turns out almost every ad network actually does this!

• Can’t ignore it – almost all ad networks depend on it and use it
old_write = document.write;
document.write = function(s) { write_buffer[principal] += s; }  // buffer the writes!

var flush_write = function(principal) {
    var i = document.createElement("ins");
    i.innerHTML = write_buffer[principal];  // invoke the browser’s parser!
    write_buffer[principal] = "";
    foreach script element e within i do {
        var newScript = makeFunction(e.textContent);
        e.textContent = "";
        runAs(principal, newScript);
    }
    i.owner = principal;
document.lastChild.appendChild(i);  // append i to page (without running scripts)"
# Attack Scenarios Tested

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Scenario</th>
<th>Policy Enforced by FlashJaX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flash Circumvention of SOP</td>
<td>Principal-specific whitelisting policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-language Heap-spray Attack</td>
<td>Resource bound policy on heap writes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Principal Resource Abuse</td>
<td>Principal-specific access control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrapper Vulnerabilities</td>
<td>DOM API Aliasing Detection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality and Integrity Violations</td>
<td>Principal-specific, fine-grained access control of page real-estate and data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad-specific Attacks</td>
<td>Various (see paper)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>