IRM Enforcement of Java Stack Inspection

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Abstract

Two implementations are given for Java’s stack-inspection access-control policy. Each implementation is obtained by generating an inlined reference monitor (IRM) for a different formulation of the policy. Performance of the implementations is evaluated, and one is found to be competitive with Java’s less-flexible, JVM-resident implementation. The exercise illustrates the power of the IRM approach for enforcing security policies.

1. Introduction

Java was designed to support construction of applications that import and execute untrusted code from across a network. The language and run-time system enforce security guarantees for downloading a Java applet from one host and executing it safely on another. In Sun’s Java implementation [12, 14, 11], some of these security guarantees involve run-time checks by the JVM (Java Virtual Machine), others involve load-time checks on the JVML (Java Virtual Machine Language) bytecode files defining JVM classes—the unit of JVM binary code and of Java object hierarchies—and still others follow from the syntax of JVML and the Java programming language.

The JVM run-time checks enforce access-control policies that associate access rights with the class that initiates the access. The sandbox policy of early (pre Java 2) JVM implementations distinguishes between code residing locally and code obtained from across the network. The more recent Java 2 stack inspection policy refines this. In Java 2, whether an access is permitted can depend on the current nesting of method invocations. Enforcement of the stack inspection access-control policy therefore relies on information found on the JVM run-time call stack.

Changing which access-control policy is supported by the JVM requires changing the JVM. Thus, programs expecting Java 2’s stack inspection policy to be enforced cannot execute on earlier-generation JVM implementations. On a JVM that enforces the stack inspection policy, applications requiring other access-control policies might be ruled out altogether, might require awkward constructions1, or might be forced to employ their own application-level custom enforcement mechanisms. Finally, such a JVM includes mechanisms that may or may not be needed for executing any given Java application. For embedded applications, where memory is at a premium, the size of the JVM footprint is crucial; there is considerable incentive to omit unused enforcement mechanisms.

This paper describes an alternative to putting access-control enforcement in a run-time environment, such as the JVM. We show how an in-lined reference monitor (IRM) can be merged into Java applications to enforce security policies like stack inspection. With the IRM approach, a trusted rewriter instruments applications with checks that cannot be circumvented and that cause execution to be monitored for violations of a specified security policy.2 Two IRM implementations of stack inspection are reported—one is a reformulation of security passing style proposed in [19, 20]; the other is new and exhibits performance that is competitive with existing commercial JVM-resident implementations.

1For example, certain access-control policies can be implemented with stack inspection only by creating multiple copies of the same class in different code bases or by creating multiple instances of identical class loaders.

2The IRM approach is capable of enforcing EM policies [16], an extremely rich class that includes mandatory and discretionary access control, Chinese Wall, type enforcement, and the Clark-Wilson commercial policy but that excludes certain information flow policies.

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Java 2’s stack inspection policy is a particularly challenging one to enforce with an IRM because state relevant to policy enforcement (the JVM run-time call stack) is not directly accessible to Java applications. That we are able to obtain a new implementation exhibiting competitive performance reflects well on the practicality of the IRM approach. And having an IRM implementation for stack inspection means that Java 2 programs can be run on earlier generation JVM implementations, that variants of stack inspection as well as entirely new security policies can be enforced on Java programs without changing the JVM, and that unused enforcement mechanisms need not bloat Java applications or the JVM.

We proceed as follows. Section 2 briefly summarizes our PoET/PSLang toolkit for synthesizing IRMs; PoET/PSLang is a successor to our SASI tool [7]. Section 3 reviews Java 2’s stack inspection policy and the primitives that implement this policy. An IRM version of the security-passing style [19, 20] implementation of stack inspection is described in Section 4; an IRM implementation for a new way to support Java 2’s stack inspection policy is given in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 concludes with some remarks about the IRM approach and about limitations we discovered in Java’s stack inspection policy.

2. Inlined Reference Monitors

For a reference monitor [2] to enforce a security policy, (i) it must mediate all events relevant to the policy being enforced, (ii) its integrity must be protected from subversion by applications, and (iii) its presence must be transparent to applications [15]. Address-space isolation has traditionally been employed for ensuring the integrity of reference monitors, but other approaches are also feasible.

With an in-lined reference monitor, a load-time, trusted rewriter merges checking code into the application itself and uses program analysis and program rewriting to protect the integrity of those checks. The application is thus transformed by the rewriter into a secured application, which is guaranteed not to take steps violating the security policy being enforced. See Figure 1.

Specifying an IRM involves defining
- security events, the policy-relevant operations that must be mediated by the reference monitor;
- security state, information stored about earlier security events that is used to determine which security events can be allowed to proceed; and
- security updates, program fragments that are executed in response to security events and that update the security state, signal security violations, and/or take other remedial action (e.g. block execution).

Policy Enforcement Toolkit (PoET) [6] implements IRMs for JVM applications. A primary concern in the design of PoET was the trusted computing base. PoET comprises approximately 17,500 lines of Java source code and thus increases the size of the trusted computing base by that amount. Although the PoET rewriter does local optimizations on inserted code—to delete (some) superfluous enforcement checks—it does not attempt global program analysis because we feared further increases to the size and complexity of the trusted computing base. In addition, PoET works at the level of JVML (and not the Java programming language). Transforming Java programs instead of JVML programs would make a Java compiler part of the trusted computing base, an unwise choice given the size and complexity of Java compilers. Moreover, by choosing to transform JVML programs, we do not require that source code for an application be available at a site for a security policy to be imposed by the site on that application.

Note that the PoET rewriter need not be run on the same computer as the JVM or even as the Java compiler. Thus, PoET contributes to the size of the trusted computing base without increasing the size of the run-time environment used to execute Java applications. In most cases, PoET will run on the same computer as the JVM, yet it is not difficult to imagine mobile-code and other networked settings.

Currently, PoET does not process Java native methods—code written in native machine language—and this restricts what policies can be enforced by excluding some security events. However, this is not a limitation of the IRM approach in general, as demonstrated by x86 SASI [7], which implements IRMs on x86 machine-language applications.
IMPORT LIBRARY Lock;
ADD SECURITY STATE {
    int openWindows = 0;
    Object lock = Lock.create();
}

ON EVENT begin method
WHEN Event.fullMethodNameIs("void java.awt.Window.show()")
PERFORM SECURITY UPDATE {
    Lock.acquire(lock);
    if (openWindows = 10) {
        HALT[ "Too many open GUI windows" ];
    }
    openWindows = openWindows + 1;
    Lock.release(lock);
}

ON EVENT begin method
WHEN Event.fullMethodNameIs("void java.awt.Window.dispose()")
PERFORM SECURITY UPDATE {
    Lock.acquire(lock);
    openWindows = openWindows - 1;
    Lock.release(lock);
}

Figure 2. PSLang security policy that allows at most 10 open windows.

where security policies are added to an application before that application is distributed to other sites for execution.

The integrity of a PoET-inserted IRM’s security state and security updates is protected by JVML type-safety guarantees, since the JVML type system prohibits access to code and data not in the classes originally comprising an application. JVML type-safety also means that JVML applications are unaffected by the presence of checking code that PoET adds to create an IRM. This is because JVML type-safety prevents code from being viewed as data, so code inserted by the PoET rewriter cannot be directly detected by the application that was modified. In addition, JVML typesafety prevents a Java application from mentioning names and types not in that application’s original namespace; the PoET rewriter chooses the names and types for any checking code it adds accordingly.4

Security policies for PoET are specified using Policy Specification Language (PSLang), an event-oriented, imperative language with Java-inspired syntax. PSLang is a small subset of Java so that the PSLang compiler could be small. In PSLang security policies, any JVM event that could occur during execution of the original application—from method calls to arithmetic operations—can be identified as a security event and, therefore, will trigger execution of an associated security update. PSLang is expressive enough to specify the EM policies of [16].5

To illustrate the syntax of PSLang, Figure 2 gives a policy to prevent Java applications from opening more than 10 Java windows. The security state is defined in the ADD SECURITY STATE block at the start of the specification. It consists of an integer variable (openWindows) and a mutual exclusion lock (lock). Variable openWindows counts the number of open windows; lock is used to protect openWindows from concurrent access. Security updates are introduced by PERFORM SECURITY UPDATE (two are in Figure 2), and security events are identified by ON EVENT ... WHEN tags. The two security events in the policy of Figure 2 specify that the IRM executes security updates prior to method invocations for opening and closing Java windows. Whenever the application attempts to open a window, the JVM executing the application is terminated (because HALT is invoked) if 10 windows have already been opened (i.e., openWindows = 10); otherwise, openWindows is incremented. And whenever a window is closed, openWindows is decremented.

4The presence of an IRM for certain policies cannot be completely hidden. Reflection and the measurement of execution timing can allow a Java application to detect added code (but does not compromise security enforcement).

5To be precise, any security policy that can be specified using a security automaton involving transition predicates that are JVM events can be formulated in PSLang.
3. Review of Java 2’s Stack Inspection Policy

Java 2’s stack inspection access-control policy is based on policy files which associate permissions with protection domains. The policy file read when the JVM starts is what defines the access-control policy for applications then executed by that JVM, as follows.

Protection domains. Each application initially is a sequence of bytes stored outside the JVM. The bytes are fetched by a class loader and then executed by the JVM. Prior to execution, the bytes are assigned to a protection domain in accordance with the source of the bytes (a network address or a file name) and any attached cryptographic signature.6

Permissions. Each protection domain implies a set of permissions. This set includes all those permissions associated with the protection domain by the policy file, as well as other implied permissions. The definition of a permission—a class—states what permissions it implies by implementing an implies method.

As an example, Figure 3 depicts three protection domains: Untrusted Applet, GUI Library, and File System. Permissions associated with each domain appear in the box below the name of the protection domain; pseudo-code associated with that domain appears below the permissions. Notice that file access permissions are given in the figure using patterns rather than complete file names—the implies method would decode those patterns to generate permissions for actual files in the expected way.

For a permission P, invoking the checkPermission(P) method of Java 2 throws a security exception if access should not be allowed to proceed; it otherwise has no visible effect. Whether a security exception is thrown depends on the protection domains assigned to the methods from which control has not yet returned—methods having frames on the JVM call stack when checkPermission(P) is invoked. Specifically, when checkPermission(P) is invoked, the JVM call stack is traversed from top to bottom (i.e., starting with the frame for the method containing the checkPermission(P) invocation) until either the entire stack is traversed or an invocation is found within the scope of a doPrivileged block. In that traversal, the stack frames encountered are checked to make sure their associated protection domains imply permission P; if some frame doesn’t, a security exception is thrown.

Observe that doPrivileged supports a form of rights amplification. Without doPrivileged or some equivalent, it would be impossible to invoke methods that require permissions not already held by the invoker. Such rights amplification is crucial, for example, when untrusted code invokes a system routine. A system routine is trusted to perform adequate checks before exercising the power that comes with the more powerful permissions in its associated protection domain; it should also be trusted to invoke only methods that are similarly prudent. So, a construct like doPrivileged that allows an invoked method to exercise permissions beyond those of its invoker is both sensible and useful.

The pseudo-code in Figure 3 illustrates how doPrivileged is used. display directly invokes the load method of File System and invokes the use plain font method of GUI Library. Also note that use plain font invokes load—loading a font may require

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6The Java class loader used to fetch those bytes can also be involved in determining the protection domain of those bytes [13]. Since new class loaders can be created at runtime, protection domains can be created dynamically, thereby helping to overcome the static nature of policy files.
Method call/return: \( A \rightarrow B \)
At start of \( B \), look up protection domain \( P_B \) for \( B \)'s
code and push \( P_B \) on the thread-local domain-
stack. At return from \( B \) (either normally or by
a thrown exception), pop domainStack, removing \( P_B \).

checkPermission\((P)\)
Scan domainStack from top to bottom (without
modifying it), and look at each protection domain
\( p \). Throw a security exception if \( p \) does not imply
\( P \), but accept if \( p = \text{doPriv} \) or the bottom of do-
mainStack is reached.

\textbf{Create thread:} \( T \)
Set the domainStack of \( T \) to contain a copy of
the contents of the domainStack of its parent thread.

\textbf{Table 1. IRM}_{SPS} \textbf{implements security-passing style.}

loading a file that contains bit maps for the font. We then
have:

- In invoking \texttt{load(’thesis.txt’)}, the
checkPermission \texttt{will throw a security exception if protection domains File System (the frame at}
the top of the stack) and Untrusted Applet (the next frame on the stack) do not each imply the
needed permissions for reading that file. They do if \texttt{thesis.txt} resides in \texttt{/home/ue}.

- In invoking \texttt{load(’Courier’)} while executing
in use plain font, the checkPermission \texttt{will throw a security exception if protection domains File}
System (the frame at the top of the stack) and GUI
Library (the next frame on the stack) do not each imply the
needed permissions for reading that file. They
do if \texttt{Courier} resides in \texttt{/fonts}. Untrusted Ap-
plet is not checked for permissions, because the invo-
cation of \texttt{load} in GUI Library is within the scope of a doPrivileged.

Java’s stack inspection policy also handles dynamic cre-
ation of threads. When a new thread \( T \) is created, \( T \) is given
a copy of the existing run-time call stack to extend. The
success of subsequently evaluating checkPermission in
thread \( T \) thus involves permissions associated with the call
stack (or some other representation of the permissions im-
plied by the call stack) when \( T \) is created.

4. A Security-Passing Style IRM

The first work on modifying JVML programs to enforce
stack inspection is described in [19, 20]. There, an ad-
tional variable is introduced to replicate information from
the JVM run-time call stack. This variable is changed upon
invoking or returning from a method call as well as upon
entering or exiting the scope of a doPrivileged block; the
variable is scanned when checkPermission is evaluated.
The resulting scheme is called security-passing style (SPS)
because the new variable is passed to method invocations as
an additional argument.

SPS is an example of the IRM approach, so it will
be no surprise that we were able to use PoET and build
IRM_{SPS}, an implementation of SPS. The security updates
that IRM_{SPS} associates with each security event—method
call and return, checkPermission, doPrivileged, and
thread creation—are sketched in Table 1; the actual PSLang
formulation requires less than three pages and appears as
Appendix A of [8].

In the PSLang that specifies IRM_{SPS}, variable do-
mainStack replicates policy-relevant information from the
JVM run-time call stack; this variable is local to each
thread (and is equivalent to the additional explicit argument
to method invocations employed in [19, 20]). It is worth
noting exactly how IRM_{SPS} handles security updates asso-
ciated with a method call from \( A \) to \( B \). Permissions for
\( B \) could be added to security state domainStack either
inside method \( A \) or inside method \( B \). But performing the
update inside method \( A \) turns out to be less desirable in part
because when \( B \) is a virtual method (the Java equivalent of
a function pointer), a dynamic lookup would be required
to determine its permissions. Therefore, IRM_{SPS} does the
security update inside method \( B \).

Performance Overhead

In order to understand the performance of stack inspec-
tion implementations, we must know the frequency and
cost of relevant security events in actual applications. We
therefore measured four applications: the Jigsaw 2.01 web
server [3], Sun’s javac Java 1.1 compiler [12], the tar
utility [5], and an MPEG video player [1]. All were run
Method calls doPrivileged checkPermission count avg checked New threads

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jigsaw</td>
<td>2,476,731</td>
<td>1,002</td>
<td>5,333</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>javac</td>
<td>1,456,970</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,067</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tar</td>
<td>19,580</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6,509</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPEG</td>
<td>35,997,662</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Frequency of stack inspection primitives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method call</th>
<th>doPrivileged</th>
<th>checkPermission</th>
<th>New thread</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.00µs</td>
<td>1.66µs</td>
<td>7.1µs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) Benchmarked cost of IRM\textsubscript{SPS} primitives (at stack depth 10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JVM</th>
<th>IRM\textsubscript{SPS}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jigsaw</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>javac</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tar</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPEG</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(c) Overhead of JVM-resident and IRM\textsubscript{SPS} implementations.

Table 2. Assessing stack inspection performance.

using modern JVMs\textsuperscript{7} with garbage collection disabled on a 300Mhz Pentium II running Windows 98. Since quantifying access-control overhead was of interest, the first three benchmark applications used the same set of 500 small synthetic Java source files as their input.

Table 2(a) shows how many times the various stack inspection primitives were invoked in the benchmarked applications. The cost of doPrivileged, checkPermission, and thread creation can be relative to the size of the JVM call stack, and—because checkPermission is dominant—we also report the average number of accessed stack frames ("avg checked") for that operation. So that the numbers are less dependent on irrelevant implementation details, stack inspection primitives used in the construction of permission objects have not been counted. For instance, not counted are the doPrivileged invocations for creating each java.io.FilePermission object in Sun’s implementation.

Table 2(b) shows the overhead, in microseconds, for the IRM\textsubscript{SPS} stack inspection primitives. The values shown are averages from a synthetic benchmark of the primitives. The primitives in the last three columns were benchmarked using a stack depth of 10—each operation accessed 10 stack frames.

Table 2(c) compares the run-time overhead of Sun’s JVM-resident implementation of stack inspection and IRM\textsubscript{SPS}. The column labeled JVM gives the percentage overhead between running the application on Java 2’s JVM with stack inspection enabled versus without stack inspection enabled; the column labeled IRM\textsubscript{SPS} gives the percentage overhead between running the application with IRM\textsubscript{SPS} on Java 1.1\textsuperscript{8} versus without any IRM.

The measurements in Table 2 do not include the cost of constructing permission objects or of executing their implies methods. This better quantifies the relative differences in overhead between stack inspection implementations. The numbers shown are based on the average execution time for 15 runs of the synthetic benchmarks and the applications. Percentages in Table 2(c) relate two of these averages. For each average we computed, the standard deviation was found to be small enough to be ignored in interpreting the numbers.

The JVM-resident implementation is considerably cheaper for Jigsaw, javac, and MPEG. This is not surprising because of the per method call cost of IRM\textsubscript{SPS} and the large number of method calls each of these applications makes. However, when an application has many permission checks relative to the number of method calls, IRM\textsubscript{SPS} may exhibit less overhead than the JVM-resident implementation. This is because IRM\textsubscript{SPS} can amortize

\textsuperscript{7}For JDK 1.1.7, we used Symantec Java! JustInTime Compiler Version 3.10.107(i); for JDK 1.2, we used Sun’s distribution that employs Symantec Java! JustInTime Compiler Version 3.00.078(x).

\textsuperscript{8}We employed Java 1.1.1’s JVM to measure the overhead of IRM\textsubscript{SPS} because the stack inspection implementation already present in Java 2’s JVM would otherwise distort the measurements.
Method call/return: $A \rightarrow B$

Nothing.

checkPermission($P$)

Let bottom be the privileged stack frame number on top of privStack, or 0 if there is none. Scan the current JVM call stack from top to bottom and find the protection domain $p$ for each stack frame—reject if ever $p$ does not apply $P$. If there was no privileged stack frame, likewise scan the ancestralStack.

doPrivileged {$S$}

At the beginning of the doPrivileged push the current JVM call stack frame number onto privStack; at the end pop it off (whether an exception was thrown or not).

Create thread: $T$

Let the ancestralStack of $T$ be either a copy of the ancestralStack of its parent thread, with the current JVM call stack pushed on top, or—if there’s a privileged stack frame number on privStack—the top portion of the current JVM call stack up to that privileged frame.

Table 3. IRM<sub>Lazy</sub> uses the JVM call stack.

the cost of creating domainStack over a large number of checkPermission’s and each checkPermission is likely to be as cheap, or cheaper, under IRM<sub>SPS</sub>. The results for tar illustrate this benefit.

An Improved SPS Implementation Scheme

The overhead of an SPS stack inspection implementation would be improved if the security state (i.e., domainStack) were not updated on each method call. In fact, updates need to be made only when a method call crosses protection domains—method calls within the same protection domain repeatedly push the same permission onto domainStack, and checkPermission is unaffected by replacing sequences of identical stack frames with a single frame.

The implementation of [19, 20] exploits this insight. The implementation comprises 12,800 lines of Java code, of which 1700 lines implement an analysis to determine whether invoked methods are in the same or different protection domains as the invoker and 6900 lines are produced by JOIE, the generic JVML rewriter [4]. With these optimizations, [19, 20] reports overall security enforcement overheads of between 13% and 17% of total execution time—still relatively high when compared to the overheads on the same applications run under the JVM-resident implementation stack inspection. Adding this optimization to IRM<sub>SPS</sub> did not seem worthwhile, given the performance gains we achieve in other ways with the IRM implementation of the next section.

5. A New IRM Stack Inspection Implementation

Sun’s implementation of stack inspection profits from having direct access to the JVM call stack, because no over-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. IRM&lt;sub&gt;Lazy&lt;/sub&gt; uses the JVM call stack.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRM&lt;sub&gt;Lazy&lt;/sub&gt; uses the JVM call stack.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no privileged stack frame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>checkPermission($P$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doPrivileged {$S$}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create thread: $T$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRM&lt;sub&gt;Lazy&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method call</td>
<td>doPrivileged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0µs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Benchmarked cost of IRM<sub>Lazy</sub> primitives (at stack depth 10).

Table 4. Assessing the IRM<sub>Lazy</sub> stack inspection implementation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JVM</th>
<th>IRM&lt;sub&gt;SPS&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>IRM&lt;sub&gt;Lazy&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
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<td>6.4%</td>
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<td>46.2%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tar</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPEG</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) Overhead of JVM-resident, IRM<sub>SPS</sub>, and IRM<sub>Lazy</sub> implementations.

tives with IRM<sub>Lazy</sub>. As with Table 2(b), reported measurements are averages from a synthetic benchmark that repeatedly performed the subject operation.

Notice that, except for method calls, the measured costs for each stack inspection primitive in Table 4(a) are higher than the IRM<sub>SPS</sub> costs given in Table 2(b). These higher costs arise because the entire stack is now being copied by the implementations of all but the method call/return stack inspection primitives. Even so, for our benchmark applications, IRM<sub>Lazy</sub> exhibits overall performance that is superior to IRM<sub>SPS</sub> and that is competitive with Sun’s JVM-resident implementation. This is seen in Table 4(b), and it is a consequence of method call/return invocations dominating performance of our benchmarks. Where IRM<sub>Lazy</sub> performs better than the JVM-resident implementation, it is because of optimizations in our PSLang specification, which do a better job of eliminating redundant work in permission checking.<sup>9</sup>

6. Concluding Remarks

The idea of separating mechanism from the policy that directs this mechanism is advocated often. Java 2’s support for the stack inspection access-control policy involves a mechanism (in the JVM) and the flexibility to direct that mechanism through policy files, protection domains, and permission classes (with their implies methods). Our IRM realizations of stack inspection actually draw a somewhat different line between policy and mechanism. With no JVM-resident mechanism, there is considerable flexibility about what policies can be enforced using the IRM approach and about when that choice of policy must be made.

This flexibility allows enforcement of policies that alter or extend what the JVM implements today. One might now contemplate remediating the various deficiencies in the Java 2 stack inspection access-control policy, allowing

- changing protection domains, permissions, and the implies method after execution of an application is commenced, enabling straightforward creation of new protection domains as execution proceeds;
- the coupling between protection domains and bytecode origin to be refined so that, for example, an application’s state is used in determining the protection domain for code; and
- the operation of doPrivileged to be extended so that only a subset of the privileges in a protection domain are amplified in a block of code.

It now even becomes possible to enforce different security policies on different Java applications, raising questions about detecting and resolving incompatibilities between those policies. However, these questions about policy composition are independent of whether or not the IRM approach is being used to enforce policies.

The IRM approach is flexible because it allows security events and security updates to be associated with any application event. This degree of flexibility can be only approximated by wrapping security enforcement code around an interface, as done by Naccio [9] (for method calls) and Generic Software Wrappers [10] (for system calls). Software-based fault isolation (SFI) [18] enforces a memory protection policy by object-code editing, and recent work on distributed virtual machines also is concerned with enforcing security policies by code rewriting [17]. Clearly, the set of enforceable security policies is restricted if, as in this related work, only some—not all—potential security events can be monitored, only some security state maintained, and only some types of security updates supported.

Flexibility is a double-edged sword. The IRM approach is not only flexible enough to implement Java 2’s stack inspection (in multiple ways!) and to implement a host of variants that address apparent limitations in the policy, but it is

<sup>9</sup>Similar optimizations are done in IRM<sub>SPS</sub>.
also flexible enough to allow policies to be defined that have unanticipated consequences or vulnerabilities. We have no way to guarantee that our PSLang formulations of stack inspection are indeed the policy supported by Sun’s distribution. To get such assurance, we would need a formal specification of Sun’s stack inspection implementation and we would need a logic for PSLang specifications. Neither exists. But PSLang could easily be given a formal semantics in terms of security automata, and then it would not be difficult to reason about and/or simulate PSLang policies in order to gain confidence that they describe what is intended.

Even without a logic for reasoning about PSLang specifications, the exercise of formulating stack inspection in PSLang, a formal language, did prove enlightening. Writing the PSLang security updates forced us to ask questions about what really happens when security events occur. Surprising things about the semantics of stack inspection came to light:

- If a new thread is created from within a doPrivileged block then that thread will continue to enjoy amplified privileges—even though its code might not be within the scope of a doPrivileged block and even after its creator has exited from within the doPrivileged. This is because the new thread starts execution with a copy of its creator’s call-stack (whose top frame is marked as being within the scope of a doPrivileged).

- When a class B extends some class A but does not override A’s implementation of a method foo(), then the protection domain for A (and not B) will always be used by checkPermission for foo’s stack frame. Because B can extend A in ways that may affect the semantics of foo, (such as by overriding other methods), one might argue that the wrong protection domain is being consulted.10

Both of these “features” of stack inspection will become apparent to attentive readers of the PSLang formulations that appear in the appendices of [8]. This is not to say that there aren’t also surprises in our PSLang formulations or there aren’t aspects of the Java 2 behavior that we missed in constructing these formulations. But having—in just a few pages—a complete and rigorous description of the policy being enforced seems like a necessary condition for understanding that policy.

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References


10The rationale for the choice that was made is given in [11, §3.11.3].


