Poster: ARTist: The Android Runtime Instrumentation and Security Toolkit

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Abstract—We present ARTist, a compiler-based application instrumentation solution for Android. ARTist is based on the new ART runtime and the on-device dex2oat compiler of Android, which replaced the interpreter-based managed runtime (DVM) from Android version 5 onwards. Since dex2oat is yet uncharted, our approach required first and foremost a thorough study of the compiler suite’s internals and in particular of the new default compiler backend Optimizing. Moreover, we exemplify the viability of ARTist by re-instantiating intra-application taint tracking solutions, which hitherto depend on the now abandoned DVM, on Android 6. Our results in particular provide compelling arguments for preferring compiler-based instrumentation over alternative bytecode or binary rewriting approaches.

I. INTRODUCTION

Google’s Android OS has become a popular subject of the security research community over the last few years. Among the different directions of research on improving Android’s security, a dedicated line of work has successfully investigated how instrumentation of the interpreter (i.e., Dalvik virtual machine) can be leveraged for security purposes. This line of work comprises seminal works such as TaintDroid [1] for analyzing privacy relevant data flows within applications, AppFence [2] for protecting the end-users’ privacy, or Moses [3] for domain isolation, just to name a few.

However, with the release of Android 5 Lollipop, Google made a large technological leap by replacing the interpreter-based runtime with an on-device, ahead-of-time compilation of apps to platform specific bytecode that is executed in the new Android runtime (short ART). While this leap did not affect the app developers, it broke legacy compliance of all of the previously mentioned security solutions that rely on instrumentation of the DVM and it restricts them to Android versions prior to Lollipop. In fact, it has left the security research community with two choices for carrying on work that relies on instrumented runtimes: resorting to binary or bytecode rewriting techniques [4][5] or adapting to the novel but uncharted on-device compiler infrastructure.

Our contributions. In this work, we present a compiler-based solution that is not only able to re-instantiate previous solutions such as dynamic, intra-application taint tracking [1], but, moreover, to provide a more robust, reliable, and integrated application-layer instrumentation approach than previously possible. Concretely, we make the following contributions.

Study of the ART compiler suite. Since the novel ART compiler suite, dex2oat, is still uncharted, our solution required first and foremost a thorough study of the newly introduced dex2oat compiler. We provide, to the best of our knowledge, the first in-depth, comprehensive study of the internals of ART’s compiler suite in the form of a companioning technical report [7]. In particular, we deep-dive into its most recent backend called Optimizing that became the default with Android 6 Marshmallow. Those new insights not only allow us to implement a compiler-based solution, but also form expert knowledge that facilitates independent research on the topic.

Compiler-based app instrumentation. We design and implement a novel approach, called ARTist (ART Instrumentation and Security Toolbox), for application instrumentation based on an extended version of ART’s compiler frontend dex2oat. Our system leverages the compiler’s rich optimization framework to safely optimize the newly instrumented application code. The instrumentation process is guided by static analysis that utilizes the compiler’s intermediate representation of the app’s code as well as its static program information in order to efficiently determine instrumentation targets. A particular benefit of our solution, in contrast to alternative application layer solutions (i.e., bytecode or binary rewriting), is that the application signature is unchanged and therefore Android’s signature-based same origin model and its central update utility remain intact. To demonstrate the benefits of a solution such as our ARTist, we conduct a case study by instantiating a TaintDroid-inspired [1] dynamic intra-application taint tracking solution using ARTist. Our results provide compelling arguments for preferring compiler-based instrumentation over alternative bytecode or binary rewriting approaches.

II. THE ANDROID RUNTIME INSTRUMENTATION AND SECURITY TOOLKIT

The architecture of ARTist consists of two major components: a security-instrumented compiler (sec-compiler) and an app to deploy the compiler (deployment app). The sec-compiler is our implementation of a compile-time instrumentation tool that is based on the dex2oat compiler. The latter is a regular Android application that ships, deploys, and manages the sec-compiler.

A. Security-Instrumented Compiler

The general concept of security-instrumented compilers is not restricted in its modifications of the compiler. Given dex2oat’s modular design, there are immediately multiple possibilities apparent where app modifying code could be placed. For instance, dex2oat’s design would easily allow porting bytecode and binary rewriting approaches (Instr_{DEX} & Instr_{BIN}) into the compiler infrastructure (cf. Figure 1). Of the different choices, ARTist’s sec-compiler is concretely designed to operate on the intermediate representation of
**dex2oat’s Optimizing backend (Instr\textsubscript{OPT}),** where the existing optimization infrastructure and static code information in the Optimizing IR benefit an efficient and precise code modification. More precisely, our app instrumentation code is realized as an Optimizing and therefore modularly integrated into the optimization workflow. Consequently, our security instrumentation logic has full control over the ordering and execution of optimizations, which opens up the opportunity to optimize the already instrumented code by creating or applying compatible optimizations that improve the performance of the security code. Generally, using the Optimization interface one can extend the compiler with custom functionality (Modules) that is decoupled from dex2oat’s code base. In addition, our integrated solution implicitly takes advantage of the robustness of Optimizing’s code generators, which are well-tested, constantly improved, and in productive use on every stock Android phone running version 6+.

### B. Compiler Deployment App

Responsibility of the deployment app is to deploy the sec-compiler at application layer in addition to the system’s dex2oat binary. Using deployment app, one can create security-instrumented versions of installed applications by re-compiling the apps’ bytecode with sec-compiler and replacing the oat files stored on filesystem. To make the Android runtime agnostic to this instrumentation, two particular challenges had to be overcome. First, Android has mechanisms in place to verify that oat files correspond to their respective apps and that the paths of the oat files are correct. Our implementation solves this challenge by rewriting paths and checksums to match those that the system dex2oat would have generated. Second, the oat files are by default stored at and loaded from a protected location to which 3rd party apps have no access. A naïve solution to this problem would be to require extended privileges for our deployment app (e.g., a dedicated SELinux type or root on security-relaxed after-market ROMs). Alternatively, app virtualization solutions such as Boxify\textsuperscript{6} and NJAS\textsuperscript{7} can be applied to solve this problem without requiring extended privileges. In either case, the Android default runtime will load the instrumented oat file while remaining agnostic to the fact that it was replaced by our customized version.

While the instrumentation with ARTist already provides powerful tools to modify the application, most security solutions require additional custom code within the app (e.g., a policy decision point). To facilitate adding custom code to an instrumented app, deployment app has a preprocessing step that combines the app’s original bytecode with the additional code before the compilation. During compilation, connections between original and new code are built in form of invocations of the added code’s methods.

For the concrete deployment, we opted for utilizing the default AOSP dex2oat binary and leveraging its modularity to ship our extensions as separate libraries to the compiler suite instead of shipping deployment app with a statically linked dex2oat binary that includes our ARTist extensions. We use the LD\_LIBRARY\_PATH environment variable to ensure that our dex2oat loads and dynamically links our ARTist libraries, such as libart-compiler.so, from the assets directory of the deployment app.

### III. INTRA-APP TAINT TRACKING CASE STUDY

We study the viability of our ARTist approach through a case study by re-instantiating intra-application taint tracking, as demonstrated by the seminal TaintDroid\textsuperscript{1} work, in the form of a new ARTist Module, called TaintARTist. In contrast, to the original TaintDroid work, which was based on instrumenting the now abandoned Dalvik virtual machine (DVM), our approach abstains from instrumenting the dex execution environment and instead builds on inlining taint tracking logic into the application code base at compilation time.

We first exploit the processing features of the dex2oat compiler to detect the data flow sources and sinks and afterwards use its static analysis features to overapproximate the relevant data flows that have to be instrumented. Second, we make use of our data flow analysis to only inline taint tracking code where critical flows can happen at runtime. The result is a intra-application taint tracking prototype based on ARTist that runs solely on the application layer for Android versions 6+.

### REFERENCES


