NDSS 2013

Does Counting Still Count?

Revisiting the Security of Counting based User Authentication Protocols against Statistical Attacks

Hassan Jameel Asghar[1], **Shujun Li**[2]
Ron Steinfeld[3], Josef Pieprzyk[1]

[1]Macquarie University, Australia
[2]University of Surrey, UK
[3]Monash University, Australia

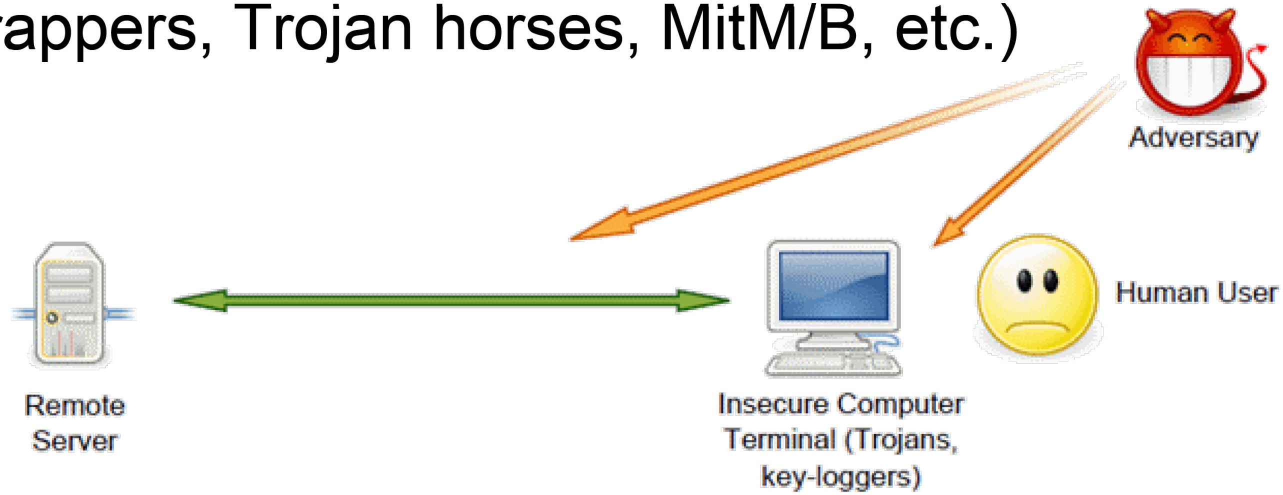
hassan.asghar@mq.edu.au, shujun.li@surrey.ac.uk
ron.steinfeld@monash.edu, josef.pieprzyk@mq.edu.au

Outline

- An Old Problem: Unassisted Human Authentication against Observers (1990s-)
- A New Threat: Yan et al.'s 2D Statistical Attack (NDSS 2012)
- Our Contributions
  - Why does Yan et al.'s attack work? – A general theoretical analysis of δD statistical attacks ($\delta \geq 1$) on counting based protocols
  - An approach for estimating the security bound
  - New principles and fixes to make counting based protocols more secure against the new attacks

The (old) problem

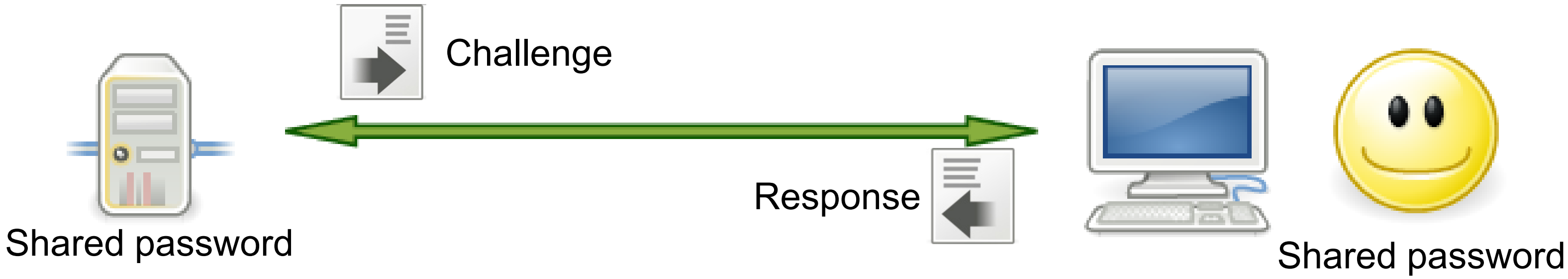
- How to authenticate an **unassisted** human user on an **observable** (**untrusted**) terminal?
  - Why **unassisted**? – Hardware devices cause usability problems and may be attacked as well.
  - Who are **observers**? – Shoulder surfers, hidden cameras, card skimmers, malware (keyloggers, screen scrappers, Trojan horses, MitM/B, etc.)



This problem was first modelled by Matsumoto and Imai (EUROCRYPT'91)

Solutions?

- Challenge-response protocols proposed as general solutions to hide the shared secret P in challenges $C=f_C(P)$ and responses $R=f_R(P,C)$.



- Many solutions exist, but the main research question remains **unanswered**:
  - How to make a protocol which is both usable and secure against adversary with **many** observed sessions?

Solutions based on counting?

- Many proposed solutions follow this approach.
- Password $P = k$ pass-objects out of n objects
- Challenge $C = l$ objects ($l \leq n$)
- Response R
  - Count pass-objects P in $C \Rightarrow \#C(P)$
  - Response $R = f_R(\#C(P))$, e.g. $R = \#C(P) \bmod 2$
- Why counting?
  - Recognizing objects and counting are believed easy tasks for most human users!

Foxtail: 
A typical counting based protocol

- Proposed by Li & Shum in 2001/2002 (published as IACR ePrint 2005/268)
- Claimed to be secure: given $O(n)$ observed sessions, the adversary's chance of success is 2^{-n}.
- Usability is better than other solutions with similar security, but still not practical (2-3 minutes).
- At NDSS 2012 Yan et al. reported a statistical attack which can fully recover P with $O(n)$ observed sessions.
  - The attack can be generalized to other counting based protocols.

How does Foxtail work?

- Challenge C of size $2l = C_1 + C_2$ (each of size l)
  - Uni-Rule: C_1 is generated such that there are 0, 1, 2 or 3 pass-objects with equal probability.
  - Rand-Rule: C_2 is generated at random (the number of pass-objects can be anything from 0 to $\min(k,l)$).
- Response R
  - R=0 if $\#C(P) \bmod 4 = 0$ or 1, otherwise R=1
- Example

  - For the above challenge C, the response R=0.

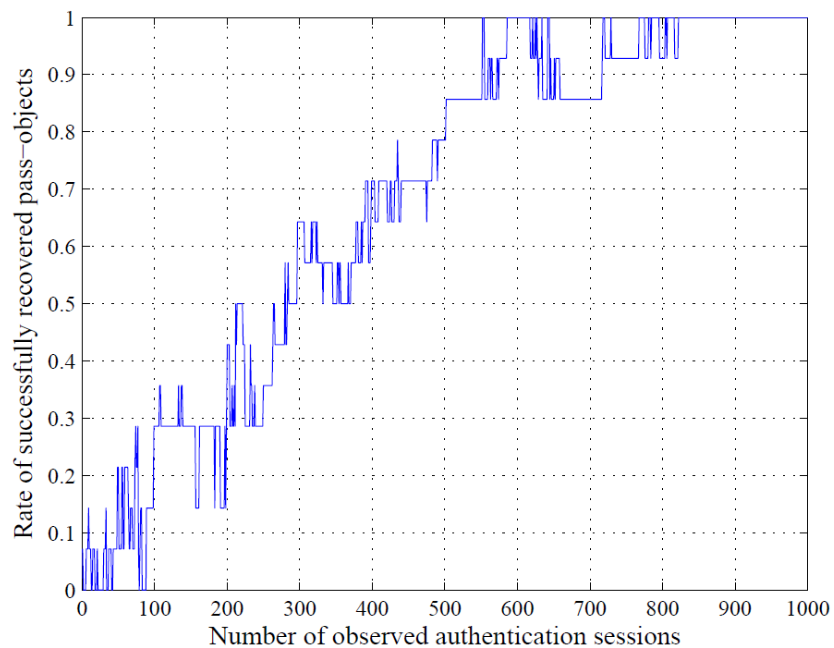
How does Yan et al.'s attack work?

- Based on counting as well (but in 2D space)!
  - For Response 0 and 1, count the occurrences of each **object pair** (o_1, o_2) in each challenge to get F_1 and F_2.
  - Rank all objects pairs according to F_1-F_2.
  - Take the top *k* distinct objects as the password.
- Why does it work?
  - No theoretical explanation, but Yan et al.'s experiments revealed pass-object pairs tend to produce larger F_1-F_2.

Object Pairs	0-response	1-response	Difference
(1, 2)	28	24	+4
(1, 3)	32	26	+6
:	:	:	:
(*n*-1, *n*)	40	28	+12

How well does Yan et al.'s attack work to break Foxtail?

- Parameters of Foxtail: $(n,k,l)=(140,14,15)$
- Results
  - Password recovered in about 711 authentication sessions using 2D frequency tables
  - 90% of pass-objects recovered in about 540 sessions



Our contributions

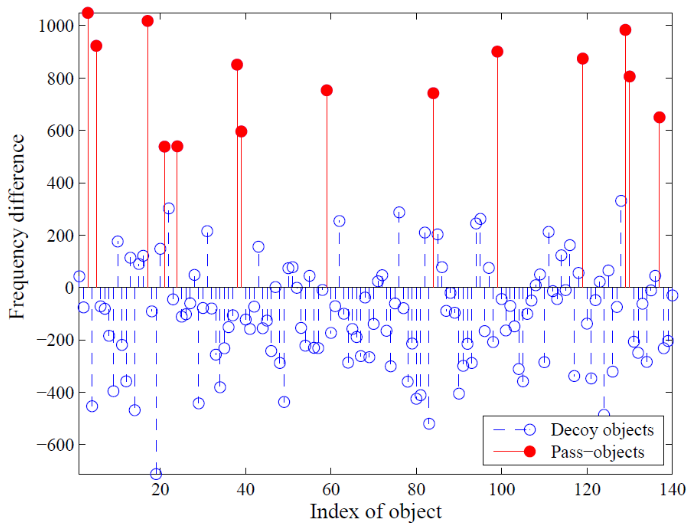
- Why does Yan et al.'s attack work?
  - Yan et al.'s 2D attack $\Rightarrow$ δD attacks ($\delta \geq 1$)
  - 1D attack works as well! $\Rightarrow$ Yan et al.'s 2D attack is just a generalization of the 1D attack to 2D space!
  - A general theoretical analysis of δD attacks
- A theoretical approach for estimating the security lower bound against δD attacks
  - This presentation will not cover this part due to time limit.
- Two new principles of designing new protocols
- Fixes to make counting based protocols more secure against δD attacks (so to make counting still work)

Why does Yan et al.'s attack work?

- Three equalities about each object's occurrence frequency must hold to disable each δD attack
  - $\xi_{pass}(0)=\xi_{decoy}(0)$
  - $\xi_{pass}(1)=\xi_{decoy}(1)$
  - $\xi_{pass}(0)-\xi_{pass}(1)=\xi_{decoy}(0)-\xi_{decoy}(1)$
- $3\delta_{max}$ equalities, but only 3 parameters (n,k,l)
- Yan et al.'s attack works because **none** of the above equalities holds when δ=2!
- $\Rightarrow$ Both theoretical and experimental analysis revealed that Foxtail can **never** be made absolutely secure against δD attacks!

1D attack works as well!

- 1D attack also works!
  - For the default parameter $(n,k,l)=(140,14,15)$, the password was recovered after about 7,000 authentication sessions were observed.
  - Less efficient than 2D attack, but still a theoretical threat!
- Further analysis shows when $\delta>2$, the attack still works but the number of required sessions increases drastically.



Beyond response dependent attacks and Foxtail

- The δD attacks discussed so far treat challenges corresponding to different response values separately.
- We can also treat all challenges equally without considering the response values.
- $\Rightarrow$Two classes of statistical attacks
  - δD RDFA = Response dependent frequency analysis
  - δD RIFA = Response independent frequency analysis
- Foxtail was designed with only 1D RIFA in mind.
- Both attacks can be applied to many other protocols (not only counting based).

Two new principles for designing protocols based on counting

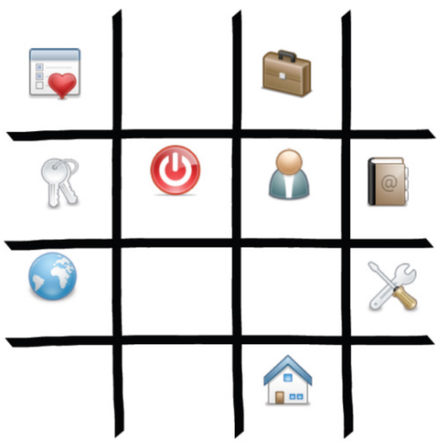
1. Each object should be sampled independently with the same probability regardless of its type (pass- or decoy objects).
   - This is to prevent RIFA.
2. The response should be independent of the number of pass-objects in each challenge.
   - This is to prevent RDFA.
   - It seems contradictory, but we will see how it may not be so.

A general fix to any counting based protocols with binary responses

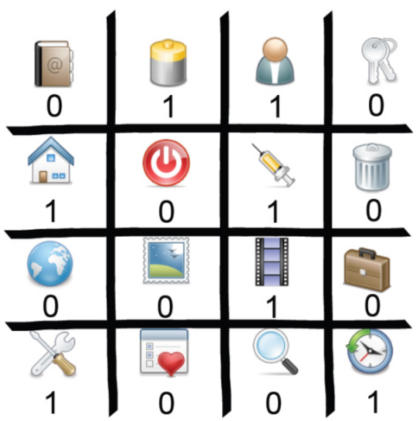
- Generate challenges without distinguishing between pass- and decoy objects
  - Rand-Rule: select *l* objects at random
  - Each object appears with the same probability *p* (*l* will be session varying if $p<1$)
- Flip the response by a hidden bit (challenge)
  - The (binary) response is flipped according to a random hidden bit (which can be seen as a hidden challenge).
  - This makes responses independent of the number of pass-objects present in the challenge.
- If the response is not binary, the random hidden bit will be replaced by a random hidden variable.

How to generate the random hidden bit?

- Ideally, an out-of-band (OOB) channel can be used.
  - This idea was proposed by some other researchers at CHI 2008 to design a solution based on hidden challenges.
- If an OOB channel is not acceptable or impossible, the flip bit has to be hidden in the public challenge.
  - Below is an example for Foxtail.



First challenge



Second (or flip-bit) challenge

A fix to the fix

- The implementation of the fix without an OOB channel is actually still insecure.
  - The adversary can guess the position of the flip bit.
  - If the guess is wrong, nothing happens.
  - If the guess is correct, it will contribute to the frequency difference between pass- and decoy objects.
  - Experimentally validated, so it is a real threat.
- A possible fix to the fix
  - Use m>1 flip bits instead of just one.
  - When m=k, the adversary will have to guess the whole password so have no advantage by guessing the m bits.
  - Usability suffers: authentication time increases.

Yet another (less generic) fix to Foxtail protocol (1)

- Foxtail 2.1: The fixed Foxtail protocol
  - All objects appear in each challenge.
  - Each object is assigned a random weight in {0,1,2,3}.
  - The response function is changed to the sum of the weights of all pass-objects mod 4.
- Is this enhanced Foxtail secure?
  - Secure against δD RIFA for any $1 \leq \delta \leq k$.
  - Secure against δD RDFA when $\delta < k$.
  - "Insecure" against kD RDFA, but in this case the attacking complexity is the same as brute forcing the password. $\Rightarrow$ Secure against kD RDFA as well.
- Usability suffers: challenges are large.

Yet another (less generic) fix to Foxtail protocol (2)

- Foxtail 2.2: The fixed Foxtail protocol
  - Only l objects appear in each challenge.
  - Each object is assigned a random weight in {0,1,2,3}.
  - Rand-Rule is used to select the l objects.
  - The response function is changed to the sum of the weights of all pass-objects mod 4.
- Is this enhanced Foxtail secure?
  - Secure against δD RIFA for any $1 \le \delta \le k$.
  - Theoretically insecure against δD RDFA for any $1 \le \delta \le k$.
  - >2,000 sessions are needed to launch a successful attack when $(n,k,l)=(140,14,20)$. $\Rightarrow$ **Practically** secure!
- Usability improves: challenges are smaller.

Usability and future work

- At NDSS 2012 Yan et al. also proposed a framework for estimating usability of human authentication protocols without running any real user study.
- The estimated authentication times
  - Original insecure Foxtail: 213 seconds
  - Foxtail 2.1: 475 seconds
  - Foxtail 2.2: 274 seconds
- Foxtail 2.2 is practical secure and slightly less usable than the original Foxtail.
- Open questions for future work: 1) are there other attacks to Foxtail 2.x? 2) how can we do better?

Thanks for your attention!