Using Parse Tree Validation to Prevent SQL Injection Attacks

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July 1, 2011
Abstract

An SQL injection attack targets interactive web applications that employ database services. Such applications accept user input, such as form fields, and then include this input in database requests, typically SQL statements. In SQL injection, the attacker provides user input that results in a different database request than was intended by the application programmer. That is, the interpretation of the user input as part of a larger SQL statement, results in an SQL statement of a different form than originally intended. We describe a technique to prevent this kind of manipulation and hence eliminate SQL injection vulnerabilities. The technique is based on comparing, at run time, the parse tree of the SQL statement before inclusion of user input with that resulting after inclusion of input. We wrote a simple Bison grammar for a subset of SQL and a lexer in Flex, then a PHP frontend that presents the user differences between parse trees of two queries: a reference query and a query to test.

Based on Using Parse Tree Validation to Prevent SQL Injection Attacks by Gregory T. Buehrer, Bruce W. Weide, and Paolo A. G. Sivilotti.
1.2 SQL injections defined

SQL injection is a type of security attack whereby a malicious user’s input is parsed as part of the SQL statement sent to the underlying database. Many variations exist, but the central theme is that the user manipulates knowledge of the query language to alter the database request. The goal of the attack is to query the database in a manner that was not the intent of the application programmer.

1.3 Our Bison grammar

We wrote a simple yacc/Bison grammar for a subset of SQL. We could have used real-world production-ready grammars from open source projects such as PostgreSQL\(^1\) or MySQL\(^2\), but they are too complex for our purpose. Semantic actions are C functions to build the tree.

Parser.y

\%

#include <stdlib.h>
#include <string.h>
#include "TypeParser.h"
#include "ParserParam.h"

static SExpression *e;

SExpression* assign(SExpression* element) {
SExpression* temp = (SExpression *) malloc(sizeof(SExpression));
memcpy(temp, &element, sizeof(element));
return temp;
}

SExpression* createHead(SExpression *firstchild) {
SExpression* head = (SExpression *) malloc(sizeof(SExpression));

if ( NULL != head ) {
strncpy(head->m_type, "start", sizeof(head->m_type));

head->m_first = firstchild;
head->m_second = NULL;
head->m_third = NULL;
head->m_fourth = NULL;
head->m_fifth = NULL;
}

\(^1\)yacc grammar can be found in src/backend/parser/, filename: gram.y
\(^2\)http://www.w3.org/2005/05/22-SPARQL-MySQL/sql_yacc
%start start

start :
  sql { e = createHead($1); }

sql: /* empty */ {$$ = createNode("sql", NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL); }
| sql SEMICOLON {$$ = createNode("sql", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL); e = createHead($$); printTree(e, 1); }
| sql statement SEMICOLON {$$ = createNode("sql", $1, $2, NULL, NULL, NULL); e = createHead($$); printTree(e, 1); }

statement:
  create_table_statement {$$ = createNode("statement", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| drop_table_statement {$$ = createNode("statement", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| insert_statement {$$ = createNode("statement", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| select_statement {$$ = createNode("statement", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| delete_statement {$$ = createNode("statement", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}

drop_table_statement:
  DROP TABLE table {$$ = createNode("drop_table_statement", $3, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}

create_table_statement:
  CREATE TABLE table LPAREN base_table_element_commalist RPAREN
  {$$ = createNode("create_table_statement", $3, $5, NULL, NULL, NULL);}

insert_statement:
  INSERT INTO table opt_column_commalist values_or_query_spec
  {$$ = createNode("insert_statement", $3, $4, $5, NULL, NULL);}

select_statement:
  SELECT opt_distinct select_expr_di_list
  FROM table_references 
  opt_where
  opt_orderby {$$ = createNode("select_statement", $2, $3, $5, $6, $7);}
| SELECT opt_distinct select_expr_di_list opt_where opt_orderby
  {$$ = createNode("select_statement", $2, $3, $4, $5, NULL);}
delete_statement:
DELETE FROM table opt_where
{$$ = createNode("delete_statement", $3, $4, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;

opt_where: /* empty */
{$$ = createNode("opt_where", NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);)
| WHERE search_condition
{$$ = createNode("opt_where", $2, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;

opt_orderby: /* empty */
{$$ = createNode("opt_orderby", NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);)
| ORDER BY column_ref
{$$ = createNode("opt_orderby", $3, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;

select_expr_di_list: select_expr_list
{$$ = createNode("select_expr_di_list", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);)
| TIMES
{$$ = createNode("select_expr_di_list", NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;

select_expr_list: column_ref
{$$ = createNode("select_expr_list", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);)
| INTNUM
{$$ = createNode("select_expr_list", NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);)
| select_expr_list COMMA column_ref
{$$ = createNode("select_expr_list", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;

search_condition: boolean_term
{$$ = createNode("search_condition", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);)
| boolean_term OR search_condition
{$$ = createNode("search_condition", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;

boolean_term: boolean_factor
{$$ = createNode("boolean_term", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);)
| boolean_factor AND boolean_term
{$$ = createNode("boolean_term", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;

boolean_factor: boolean_primary
{$$ = createNode("boolean_factor", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);)
| NOT boolean_primary
{$$ = createNode("boolean_factor", $2, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;
boolean_primary: comparison_predicate
{$$ = createNode("boolean_primary", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| LPAREN search_condition RPAREN
{$$ = createNode("boolean_primary", $2, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;
comparison_predicate:
expr GREATER expr
{$$ = createNode("comparison_predicate", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| expr LESSER expr
{$$ = createNode("comparison_predicate", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| expr EQUALS expr
{$$ = createNode("comparison_predicate", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;
expr:
term {
$$ = createNode("expr", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| expr PLUS expr {$$ = createNode("expr", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| expr MINUS expr {$$ = createNode("expr", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;
term:
atom {
$$ = createNode("term", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| atom TIMES term {
$$ = createNode("term", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| atom DIV term {
$$ = createNode("term", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;
table_references: table
{$$ = createNode("table_references", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| table_references COMMA table
{$$ = createNode("table_references", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;
values_or_query_spec:
VALUES LPAREN insert_atom_commalist RPAREN
{$$ = createNode("values_or_query_spec", $3, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| select_statement
{$$ = createNode("values_or_query_spec", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;
insert_atom_commalist:
insert_atom
{$$ = createNode("insert_atom_commalist", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| insert_atom_commalist COMMA insert_atom
{$$ = createNode("insert_atom_commalist", $1, $3, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
;
insert_atom:
atom {
$$ = createNode("insert_atom", $1, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}
| NULLX {
$$ = createNode("insert_atom", NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL, NULL);}

1.4 The lexer

Here’s our simple (and a bit dirty) Flex lexer:

Lexer.l

```flex
%option noyywrap yylineno case-insensitive
%
#include "TypeParser.h"
#include "Parser.h"
#include <stdio.h>
#include <string.h>
#define returntoken(tok) {return (tok);}
extern int yyerror(const char* errmsg);
%

"AND" returntoken(AND);
"BY" returntoken(BY);
"CREATE" returntoken(CREATE);
"DELETE" returntoken(DELETE);
```
"DISTINCT" returntoken(DISTINCT);
"DROP" returntoken(DROP);
"FROM" returntoken(FROM);
"INSERT" returntoken(INSERT);
"INT" returntoken(INTEGER);
"INTO" returntoken(INTO);
"NOT" returntoken(NOT);
"NULL" returntoken(NULLX);
"ORDER" returntoken(ORDER);
"OR" returntoken(OR);
"STR20" returntoken(STR20);
"SELECT" returntoken(SELECT);
"TABLE" returntoken(TABLE);
"VALUES" returntoken(VALUES);
"WHERE" returntoken(WHERE);

"-" returntoken(MINUS);
"+" returntoken(PLUS);
"*" returntoken(TIMES);
"/" returntoken(DIV);
"." returntoken(PERIOD);
";" returntoken(SEMICOLON);
"=" returntoken(EQUALS);
"<" returntoken(LESSER);
">" returntoken(GREATER);
"(" returntoken(LPAREN);
")" returntoken(RPAREN);
"," returntoken(COMMA);

[A-Za-z][A-Za-z0-9_]* { yylval.strval = strdup(yytext); returntoken(NAME);}

[0-9]+ | [0-9]+."[0-9]* | "."[0-9]* { yylval.intval = atoi(yytext); returntoken(INTNUM);}

""[\n]*"" { int c = input();
unput(c); /* just peeking */
  if(c != '\') {
    yylval.strval = strdup(yytext);
    returntoken(STRING);
  } else
    yymore();
}

""[\n]*$ { yyerror("Unterminated string"); }

"\r\n" { yylineno++; }
```
\n{ yylineno++; }

[ \t\f\v]+ { /* Ignore whitespace. */ }
[ \t\r]+ { /* Ignore whitespace. */ }

"--".*$ { }
```

### 1.5 PHP frontend

Here is a screenshot with two queries with the same parse tree:
Here is a screenshot with two queries with different parse trees (we simulate a classic SQL injection on a login form):

```
SELECT foo FROM bar WHERE user='abc' AND pass='abc';
```

```
SELECT foo FROM bar WHERE user='abc' AND pass='abc' OR 1=1
```

TREES ARE DIFFERENT!