

SECURITY EXPLORATIONS IN A NUTSHELL

BASIC INFORMATION

Security Explorations (<http://www.security-explorations.com>) was a one-man shop security company from Poland that operated from 2008 to 2019 and that provided various services in the area of security and vulnerability research. The company came to life as a result of a true passion of its founder for breaking security of things and analyzing software for security defects.



The founder

Adam Gowdiak was the company's founder and CEO. He received M.Sc. degree in Computer Science from the Poznan University of Technology. Prior to founding Security Explorations, he worked for the Poznan Supercomputing and Networking Center and Sun Microsystems Laboratories. For over 8 years, he was also an active member of a notable Polish security research group called The Last Stage of Delirium, or LSD.

Adam is an experienced Java Virtual Machine hacker, with over 100 security issues uncovered in the Java technology over the recent years. He is also the Argus Hacking Contest co-winner and the man who has put Microsoft Windows to its knees (the original discoverer of MS03-026 / MS Blaster worm bug).

PRO BONO SECURITY RESEARCH

Security Explorations has been always involved in hacking various Java based products. Over that time, we conducted several non-commercial (Pro Bono) security research projects that resulted in a discovery of dozens of highly critical security issues.

- In 2012, we showed that digital satellite TV set-top-boxes used by a major Polish satellite TV platform could be infected with malware just in the same way as PC systems are these days,
- In 2012 and 2013 we demonstrated that security of Java SE technology used by nearly a billion of users around the globe was far below the standard,
- In 2013 we broke security of Oracle Java cloud service and showed that user applications and data were not properly safeguarded in Oracle cloud environment,
- In 2014, we broke security of Oracle Database that according to Oracle CEO "hasn't been broken into for a couple of decades by anybody" and that is "so secure, there are people that complain",
- In 2014 and 2015, we discovered multiple vulnerabilities in Java security sandbox used in Google Cloud environment

- In 2019 we discovered over 30+ security vulnerabilities in a reference implementation of Java Card technology from Oracle used in financial, government, transportation and telecommunication sectors among others. Contrary to one of the major SIM card vendors' claims, we proved that Java Card vulnerabilities do matter. We showed that they can be instrumental for a discovery of far more serious issues such as a remote, over-the-air Gemalto SIM card applet loading vulnerability.

One of the missions of the company was to increase general awareness of users and vendors in the area of computer and Internet security. Pro Bono security research was the essential part of that mission.

CUTTING-EDGE SECURITY RESEARCH

We were the original discoverers of a key deficiency of Java SE security model (Reflection API weaknesses and RMI attack vector, both reported to the vendor in 2005), that has been plaguing the technology for the last decade and has manifested itself in a form of dozens of security vulnerabilities affecting software and online services coming from Apple, Google, IBM and Oracle.

We were the first to break security of:

- Java for mobile phones (J2ME) with MIDP 2.0 security features aimed at protecting users and devices from malicious software,
- Nokia Series 40 Platform devices,
- digital satellite TV set-top-boxes running Java MHP middleware from Advanced Digital Broadcast,
- secure cryptographic processors from STMicroelectronics used to secure HDTV content broadcasted by various SAT TV operators around the world (STi710x and STi7111 DVB chipsets),
- Java based cloud hosting environments coming from Oracle and Google (Oracle Java Cloud Service and Google App Engine for Java),

We were also the first to:

- discover and implement an attack against a mobile 3G phone allowing for a remote deployment and execution of a malicious Java application (i.e. a backdoor, malware or virus),
- demonstrate novel techniques for both a setup and exploitation of type confusion vulnerabilities in Java environments,
- demonstrate novel techniques for a security compromise of Oracle Database with the use of Java security vulnerabilities.

INFLUENCIAL SECURITY RESEARCH

Although we were a one man shop, our research sometimes influenced the decisions and actions of the biggest players in the industry. This further often implicated the software experience of millions of users around the world.

Our Java SE security research has been in particular very influential and was followed by an enormous set of events. Just to mention the following:

- Apple, Google, Microsoft and Mozilla blocked Java in their web browsers,
- US Department of Homeland Security warned users about Java security risks,
- Certain financial institutions decided to move away from client side Java (Applets),
- Federal Trade Commission started investigation against Oracle over deceptive Java security updates.

Our Oracle Database security research has forced Oracle to start providing regular security updates to the embedded Database Java VM.

Finally, our digital satellite TV research has again raised a question whether a secret implementation embedded in a silicon can be trusted. It also questioned the worthiness of security certifications awarded to such "closed" solutions by "renown security evaluation laboratories".

RESEARCH WITH A REAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD

The results of our researches have been used or been a subject of interest¹ to both the industry and academia. This includes, but is not limited to the following:

- major software and hardware vendors,
- security companies such as firewall vendors and antivirus companies,
- world's top universities²,
- world's top research laboratories and think-tanks,
- world's top financial institutions,
- reknown international organizations,
- cyberthreat analysis companies and organizations,
- major cable and SAT TV operators,
- government institutions,
- military and intelligence agencies.

REWARDED SECURITY RESEARCH

Our research and its thoroughness was recognized by Google. In 2015, the company issued a total of 100 000 USD in rewards to Security Explorations for a security research project targeting Google App Engine.

RESEARCH FEATURED IN THE MEDIA

Our research was featured over 200 times in various digital and printed media publications. This includes renown media outlets such as Reuters, Forbes, Bloomberg, CNN or NBC News and international technical news portals (Computerworld, Ars Technica, The Register, Dark Reading, Security Week, SC Magazine, PC World, ZDNet, InfoQ and Softpedia among others).

¹ as indicated by IP addresses recorded in our web server logs in a time period of Feb 2018-Jun 2019.

² 10 of the top 20 universities from Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai Ranking 2018).

INDEPENDENT SECURITY RESEARCH

Our ambition was to conduct quality, unbiased, vendor-free and independent security and vulnerability research. Throughout all 11 years of our activity we were always immune to various games tried by vendors and aimed at influencing the disclosure process and/or a content of our publications (real cases for our Pro Bono research outlined below):

- we never formalized any business relationships with vendors of affected technologies prior to the release of the fixes / prior to the release of the content of our publication,
- we never signed any NDA that would impact the disclosure process,
- we never provided a vendor with an advanced copy of our publications ("preview copy of a presentation", etc.),
- we never limited the disclosure of vulnerabilities details in exchange for prospects of a business cooperation,

Additionally, we never adhered to requests originating from 3rd parties aimed at revealing identities of individuals interested in our research (such as a SAT TV one).

Our non-commercial security research was 100% self-funded and the choice of its targets was never influenced by any 3rd party.

NO EXPLOIT SALES / NO NATION STATE INVOLVED

For our non-commercial security research, only original vendors responsible for the fixing of the reported issues were provided with their technical details. We neither sold, nor provided any vulnerability information or Proof of Concept codes to anyone else prior to their publication. This in particular concerns, but is not limited to:

- various nation states or defense contractors acting on their behalf,
- security vulnerability brokers.

SHOWING THE REAL STATE OF SOFTWARE SECURITY

Over many years of our activity, we were one of key players that exposed vendor's incompetence and negligence regarding security of software:

- We showed that security issues discovered in IBM, Google and Oracle products violated Oracle's "Secure Coding Guidelines for the Java Programming Language",
- We exposed questionable software quality assurance processes of IBM and Oracle by discovering multiple instances of improperly patched security vulnerabilities we reported to both companies,
- We revealed that both Google and Oracle were hosting user applications on outdated (1+ years old) and insecure versions of Java Runtime in their cloud environments,
- We showed that new security features introduced to Oracle code were not thoroughly reviewed. We demonstrated that Click2Play security feature introduced by Oracle to Java in order to protect against malicious Java content was not providing any protection to users,



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- We proved that Oracle was not delivering true statements regarding the impact of security vulnerabilities patched. The company claimed that Java security vulnerabilities were limited to the web browser only. We proved that these vulnerabilities could be remotely exploited on servers. We also demonstrated that these vulnerabilities affected Oracle's own Java cloud service offering and that they were instrumental to break security of "unbreakable" Oracle Database,
- We showed that contrary to Oracle statements, patching Java SE bugs could be done within hours, not months,
- Finally, we showed that Oracle was not delivering database patches to all clients at the same time. As a result the company was exposing its customers at the risk of being hacked,
- We showed that security of a premium content was a myth in the environment of NC+ SAT TV provider. We showed that little was done to improve security of ADB set-top-boxes and ST DVB chipsets as a response to our SAT TV research from 2012. We proved it was trivial to get unauthorized access to VOD content (thousands of movies) from premium providers such as HBO, Canal+ and Disney. Finally, we showed that NC+ users could be a victim of fraudulent charges as VOD orders could be conducted on their behalf and without their consent for arbitrarily high price input.